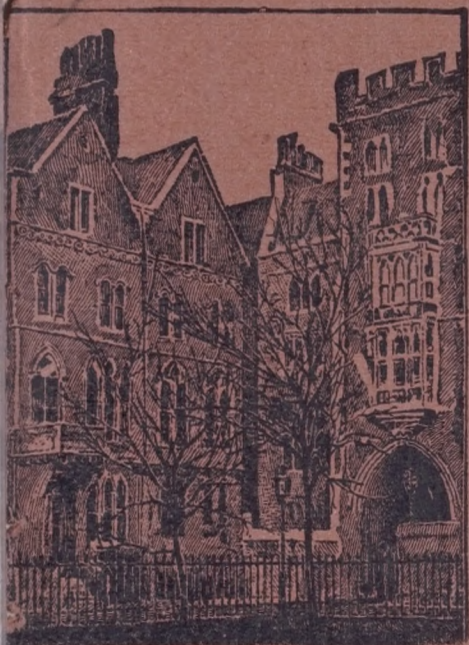








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BY
HELEN MATHERS

NEW YORK
JOHN W. LOVELL COMPANY
150 WORTH ST., COR. MISSION PLACE

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AUTHOR OF
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150 WORTH ST., COR. MISSION PLACE

1891

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MY JO, JOHN.

CHAPTER I.

“To make a happy fireside clime.
For weans and wife :
That’s the true pathos and sublime
Of human life.”

“WHY not separate?” said Mrs. Anderson, as easily as she might have said, “Will you have another egg?”

Colonel Anderson jumped up from the breakfast table as if a gadfly had stung him.

“Did you say *separate*?” he said calmly, though his features worked with emotion.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Anderson, looking perfectly amiable, “but while we are about it, why not divorce?”

“Why, indeed?” he said, with a forlorn courage. “But unfortunately the law does not grant a divorce for incompatibility of temper, and I’m not aware that I have taken to beating you—yet.”

“Why don’t you?” said Mrs. Anderson, coming insultingly close to him, and lifting a dimpled chin and rounded cheek in invitation to a slap. “You needn’t hit *hard*—and then I can divorce you!”

Colonel Anderson looked at his wife swiftly, his cheek coloring with shame, as she stood there with hands loosely clasped behind her smart breakfast-gown, and heart beating wildly in her shoes.

“So you are afraid,” she said, very low, “yet men find courage to do worse things every day of their lives, than box their wives’ ears!”

He turned abruptly away from her to the window, through which the air blew fresh and sweet, as it *can* do even in Harley Street, bringing with it the scent of the flowers that filled the boxes, and from where he stood he could see the delicate green of the trees in

Cavendish Square, and he especially noted their beauty, as he said to himself:

“Has she heard? Can she know already?”

His silence made her desperate. She sharpened her tongue—O! little rosy cause of much evil—like a sword, and does not a woman’s tongue always wag the fiercer, and cut the deeper, when it is met with a serene and passive resistance? And a woman always forgets all the bitter things she has said, and is astonished to find that a man does not forget them too.

“After all,” she said, in a voice that trembled suspiciously, “I don’t know that I should care about a divorce! Of course I should marry again—and I’m so afraid of making a second *mistake*!”

John Anderson straightened himself up suddenly, but made no answer, probably because in great crises a man’s sense of humor is usually in abeyance, while a woman’s remains in full force.

O! why did he not *laugh*, turn round and box her ears, or kiss her? A terrible feeling that he was slipping away from her, from her

voice, her influence, her very life, came over the poor woman, much as if she were a shipwrecked mariner who sees a ship recede from the shore on which he stands.

“There must be some reason for this,” he said at last, and she knew by his voice that he was angry, with the unappeasable wrath of the sweet-tempered man when he is really roused. “I suppose—you know?”

“Yes, I know,” she said drearily, looking at his back, “and I think that for both our sakes we had better separate!”

“So be it,” he said, and his voice, with a curious note of relief in it, sank into her heart like a knell. “I will see my solicitors this morning, and the sooner the deed is drawn up the better.”

“Hadn’t they better draw up one of *attachment* at the same time—yourself to Lady Blanche?” said Mrs. Anderson, with poignant sharpness.

“Be kind enough to leave Lady Blanche’s name out of this discussion,” said Colonel Anderson, sternly. “What! are you becoming a slanderous woman as well as one whom

no man could dwell with on terms of peace?"

"How loud you talk!" she cried, impatiently and irrelevantly. "We have lived together for twenty years, and yet you have not got the right pitch of my ears yet!"

"And you have lived with me twenty years without understanding me in the least at the end of them," he said, gravely.

Mrs Anderson blanched for a moment, and glanced at the tall, usually slack figure, now knit-up and made erect by manly indignation, at the usually gentle face, now hardened by wounded pride and disappointment, and her heart fluttered, while her temper remained obdurate as ever.

"Lady Blanche's husband is evidently not covetous of the peaceful charms of *her* company," she said, untying and tying a ribbon to hide the trembling of her hands. "I wonder why other people's husbands are so much more entertaining than one's own? Perhaps, now we are to be separated, I shall have an opportunity—of—finding out!"

Colonel Anderson turned swiftly, and

looked full in the face of the woman who had been his happy wife for so long, and whom he had only lately discovered to be—not perfection.

“No, Mary,” he said, “you will not. Tom will see to that. I would rather put up with all our late bickerings, and your naggings and insulting suspicions, than——”

“Don’t alarm yourself!” she interrupted him, with a passion entirely past his comprehension. “I’m much too proud to put myself on a level with you! All men may do as they like, and all women must be good. There you have the laws that rule the sexes, in a nutshell! And I *despise* your sex too heartily ever to give one of them a chance of making game of me!”

“If you think so badly of us all, and of me in particular,” he said, with dignity, “I could not ask or expect you to put up with my company any longer. I spoke in anger when I first agreed to a separation, but now, in sorrow, and deliberately, I reiterate my consent. Where there is no trust there can be no happiness, and when quarrels come to be

such a matter of every day and hourly occurrence, as they have become lately, it is far better that such cat and dog companionship should cease. A man likes a smile and a pleasant word when he comes home——”

“*Toujours perdrix !*” said Mrs. Anderson, looking fierce and dangerous. “What do you want with smiles at home when you can get so many abroad?”

“I get courtesy, ma’am,” he said, warmly, “which I don’t get here, and a welcome——”

“For which you pay,” said Mrs. Anderson, suddenly grown very pale, the little bitter core of knowledge in her heart making it for the moment almost inhuman.

He remained perfectly silent and still, and again his silence maddened her.

“What an absurd name it is for you, John Anderson!” she said, in her clear, soft tones, while her knees trembled beneath her, “faithful noble, good John Anderson!”

“And I’ll be shot if your name ought to be Mary,” said her husband. “*Mary!* what a name for a nagging, grumbling, evil-speaking——”

"I am not Lady Blanche, I know," she cried out suddenly, "but I can't help that. Only I *can* relieve you of my presence here. Fortunately we have two houses—this and Pigeonwick, and I imagine you will give me my choice between them."

"Certainly," he said, in a voice that sounded curiously flat after its lately raised tones, and he resumed his gaze out of the window.

"And I choose Pigeonwick," she said. "I always liked the country, especially at this time of year," (Did the poor woman think how it would not be always "this time of year?") "I can take Martha, and Fletcher can remain with you."

"Certainly," he said again quietly.

How easily he fell in with her plans! Yet she had proposed them in angry jest and he had leaped at the idea, and instantly turned it into deadly earnest.

"You will of course," he said, and if he had turned his head she must have seen the color in his face, "have your own income. I suppose that will be sufficient to keep the place up on?"

Mrs. Anderson drew in her breath sharply, and stood looking at her husband's back with astonished eyes, as at some unfamiliar sight.

"Does she mean to ruin *him*, too, like the other ones?" she said to herself after some moments of bewilderment. "Oh! this is too much! One would think his sense of shame would hold him back! But let him keep his money—it won't last long, with her *pattes de mouches* in it . . . Oh! what a shame, what a shame!"

"I have no doubt it will be quite sufficient," she said, icily. "Perhaps you would like me to pay Tom's college expenses out of it too?"

Colonel Anderson drew a deep breath; and she saw him brace his shoulders suddenly, as he answered in a low voice:

"If you could manage it—yes."

Mary stood quite still, scarcely believing her ears. There had never been any talk of money between these two, all the years of their married life. What had been hers was his, and his hers; and he had written the checks, and she had spent as she pleased.

She drew up her head haughtily—and

Mary could look very haughty when she pleased—and made a gesture, as if she shook herself absolutely free from him.

“I have no doubt that I could manage it,” she said, in a voice so astonishingly unlike her own that he turned round to see if indeed she was still there; and then she saw the shame, the hang-dog look in his face, and a boundless scorn for him filled her generous soul.

“I can put down the carriage,” she said, quietly; “and Tom must curtail his ‘wines’ at Oxford—and I have no doubt we shall be able to manage very well, indeed.”

He made a movement as if to speak; then checked himself, drank up in one swift comprehensive glance the expressive loathing of her face and attitude, then, with bent head, and looking absolutely crushed, passed out.

She heard Fletcher in the hall, brushing down his master, and making him tidy after his usual methodical fashion, knew the exact moment that the carefully polished hat was handed, heard the great door opened, and,

from where she stood saw her husband pass the window.

“That he should come to that—my Jo, John!” she said in a whisper, standing in the midst of the pleasant room; then she walked directly up to a mirror and looked earnestly at herself therein.

“I am not tall, like Lady Blanche,” she said to herself scornfully, “I have not ‘fine lengths’—as painters say—or, as homely people would put it, a figure like a hop-pole, that can be draped by art into *anything*! And I could afford to lose a few pounds—but what is gone from me that I used to have—something that kept him always beside me, and made us both happy, though only when it was gone, we knew *how* happy we had been?”

She glanced round the room. It looked unfamiliar, her lips trembled, and a feeling of forlornness, vivid as a nightmare of terrified loneliness in a strange place, swept over her. Bit by bit, and year by year, she had grown into the house, and all around her were signs of that building in of her life as of a nest, and

the biggest bit of all, and the most precious, was the sweetheart who had just gone out to instruct his solicitors to set him free of a woman who had tried her hardest to hold him back from going to perdition.

What if, for some time past, she had been of uncertain temper and irritating moods was it not her very love for him that made her so? and if she had been indifferent, would it not have meant that her heart had ceased to throb with love for him? When a woman really loves, she must either say kind things to a man, or cruel ones—there is no middle way for her in which to hold her tongue.

And she was to turn out from her beloved home of many years, leaving him free to spend his time and fortune on a woman who was notorious for quickly ruining any man who surrendered to her his purse-strings. Whereupon at the thought of John Anderson's double ruin, his wife put her soft brown head down on the breakfast-table and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER II.

“ Unexpected misfortunes are intolerable ; those which are foreseen are more easily borne.”
—HERODOTUS.

COLONEL ANDERSON'S feet took him without any volition of his own across Cavendish Square and up Oxford Street, this not being the way he had intended to go at all when he set out.

That refuge of the destitute, to the harried or married man, his club, had beckoned him with consoling arms as he left home, and some wild idea of a “peg” had even crossed his brain, early in the day though it was, and abstemious as his habits usually were.

But, as I have said, he went almost unconsciously in an opposite direction, and stopped, from mere force of habit, before a house in Park Street, that looked dull enough to be eminently respectable, the more especially as Lady Blanche did not at that moment happen

to be adorning one of the windows, as she had a way of doing when she had a little spare time and required something more lively than a mirror to give back her charms.

For she was a woman omnivorous of admiration, who could appreciate the admiring glance of a navvy as heartily as that of a prince, and having at all times a "guid conceit o' herself," being in that respect the prototype of "the lady with the swelled head," whom some of us know, and whose petty, paltry, eternal "I" sounds as unceasingly though not half so agreeably as the waves on the sea-shore.

Had her ladyship been visible, Colonel Anderson might have dared to knock for admission, but as it was, his courage failed him, and he pottered instead into the Park, now smart and gay with its hyacinth beds of lilac, and white, and rose, gorgeously sweet and stiff, and liable to destruction in the night from a spiteful parting stab of King Frost.

The searching sunlight shewed his face wan, and growing sharp as a pen, advertised his few grey hairs, and found out the wrinkles in his clothes, revealing him, in short, as weary

gentleman who had gone bankrupt either in mind, body, or estate, and which may be reckoned the worst of these three ills is probably the one from which a man happens at that precise moment to be suffering.

"What's wrong with Anderson?" said more than one man to another, as the slightly bowed figure moved, without salutation to any one, past the early riders in the Row.

"Taken up with Lady Blanche, hasn't he?" said one of those addressed. "Poor devil! And such a nice little wife too."

"It's the ugly wives who keep the men straight," growled out the man addressed; "take my word for it, if you *do* meet a man walking down Bond Street with his own wife instead of another man's, she is as ugly as sin."

"Anderson could never take any care of himself, but I never expected him to come a cropper *that* way."

"H'm! There's a deal of quiet obstinacy in Anderson. Those easily led men are the very devil for taking their own way when they have a mind to it."

“ Well, give me a knave, not a fool, to deal with,” said the other, as they separated. “ Your weak, amiable man does more harm than all the rogues in creation ; and from the bottom of my soul I pity his wife ! ”

John Anderson was also pitying his wife very much as he aimlessly wandered towards Knightsbridge, and his self-upbraidings were as keen as those of the parson who on first appearing in church with his bride, gave out as his text “ Behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly ! ” Johh Anderson had played the fool, and the knowledge of his folly had been well nigh unbearable while he kept it to himself, but now that his wife knew it also, and had moreover borne the revelation so hardly, there was nothing left to fear save the world’s condemnation, for which, indeed, he cared not one groat.

He had not lived for the world, unless, indeed the four walls of his house meant the universe, and if Mary were satisfied, he could always say with Browning :

“ God’s in His heaven : all’s well with the world,”

but now Mary had deserted him, and the pang of that desertion pressed the soldier hard as he faced the actual fact in all its naked ugliness and truth. Desertion—and by a comrade who had kept step for step with him, through rain and shine, for close on twenty years, through joy and sickness, and good times and bad, only to drop away from him when the worst time came of all, leaving him in the slough of a darksome path, while she stepped into the bright light of a smooth road, along which she might journey in ease and pleasure.

He scarcely thought of the ingratitude shown, and, indeed, in its true sense, there can be no ingratitude between man and wife.

The father knows it when his once supremely trusting little child, now grown big and forward, stands up and defies him, and sharper indeed than the serpent's tooth is the bite of such ungratefulness as Holy Writ assures us was suffered by our forefathers thousands of years ago even as we suffer it to-day.

And we bear the hurt silently, knowing that in a day to come our children will be pierced

even as they have pierced us, and we grieve for them and know that they will look back with unavailing tears, asking forgiveness, perchance, at ears that can no longer hear them.

John Anderson did not think of all the happiness he had brought into his wife's life, of how the very money he had spoken of as her own, was mainly derived from a settlement he had made upon her, but only of her haste to be rid of him, of her mercilessness to his fault, and now that the first smarting of his heart wound was over, a sense of injustice moved slowly in his mind, and he said to himself that if Mary had erred he would have been more merciful—and then he stopped abruptly, knowing that Mary would never have erred so, and relentless self-reproach closed around him once more.

Suddenly his thoughts flew off at a tangent, and he fell to wondering how she would get on without him.

Though she took so much care of him, the big fellow thought it was he who took care of her, and he feared she would miss him, and want him, at every turn.

He could not imagine her standing alone, any more than he could see himself without Mary. They had married so young, and been so constantly together, that the two lives together might be counted as one.

So he had thought, but lately she had been quietly unloosing the bands that held them together, and that very morning she had boldly and openly struck off the last fetter, and declared herself free.

He knew that she had reason—yet he could not kneel to her for forgiveness, knowing the wrong he had done her, and that still a greater heart than hers might have forgiven, for deeper even than his gentleness was John Anderson's pride, and even further down than that was the slow obstinacy of which his friend had just now spoken.

So that he never faltered in his intention of calling that day on the solicitors who were to arrange for the separation, and had indeed already selected the firm to whom he should go, by no means the one that conducted his usual business.

Suddenly Tom came into his mind—Tom,

who had nearly as much cause for anger and resentment as his mother, and who would naturally take his mother's side, whereas, if Tom had been a girl, thought John Anderson, wistfully, perhaps she would have stood up for her poor old dad, as daughters mostly do, and found some sort of excuse for him. It would be lonely at Harley Street when Mary had gone, and he shivered as he walked in the spring sunshine, and found the young green overhead crude and harsh, and the blue of the sky exasperatingly monotonous and bright.

With the irritability of a sick mind, his thoughts flew to Pigeonwick, and by contrast with what he actually beheld, there showed to him the warm meadow-side where he and Mary always went to look for early violets, and, vividly fresh, he seemed to smell the clear pure scent of the primroses that grew in patches in the woods, great clusters that sat in the midst of their green leaves as in baskets, and which Mary often dug up bodily and transplanted to her garden.

But all that was Mary's now—and this

Park was his, to come and go in as he willed, with its weeded paths, its costly flower-beds, and its smart and shabby crowd, that cared nothing for him, and only appraised him by his coat, and very little at that.

A little wind sprung up as he turned out of the Park gates, and seemed to hustle him, and push him rudely about, and indeed he had a sort of half-dressed, half-furnished feeling about him, and he wondered why it was, till he remembered that this was the first time for years he had ever come into the Park without Mary's hand on his arm.

He shivered with a sudden sense of mental and physical cold, as a man may who, all enwrapped in the summer warmth of home love, finds himself suddenly thrust out into the street—alone.

As he stood waiting to cross the exit from the Park, a lady suddenly drew up her "rats" and accosted him.

It was Lady Blanche, with a little boy on either side of her—no woman ever more sedulously flaunted the domesticities in the eyes of Society than did she—and there was a

little scorn as well as kindness in the glance she flashed upon the tall, sad-faced man.

“ Did you get my note ? ” she said. “ This afternoon, then, at five,” and whirled away, leaving folks to wonder why the bare-headed chap, gazing after her, seemed to have forgotten to put on his hat.

CHAPTER III.

“A woman and a windmill are never satisfied.”

—SPANISH PROVERB.

No. 300 Harley Street was not one of those fashionable houses in which the master occupies the dressing-room, and madame entertains gentlemen at afternoon tea; nor was the one addicted to dining at his club, and the other to “doing” a little dinner and play with a friend. The house, in fact, was conducted more on the lines of a country than a town one, and the tone was that of the old cavalier in the ballad, who

“Kept a brave old house at a bountiful rate,
And an old porter to relieve the poor at his gate.”

And who had for wife

“An old lady whose anger one word assuages,
And every quarter paid their old servants their wages.”

To be sure this description of the pair did

not exactly apply, but it was certainly a more faithful portrait of them than that sketched of the old man's successor :

“Like a flourishing young gallant, newly come to his land,
Who keeps a brace of painted madams at his command,
And takes up a thousand pound upon his father's land.”

While his young wife is

“A new-fangled lady that is dainty, nice and spare,
Who never knew what belonged to good housekeeping or care,
Who buys gaudy-coloured fans to play with wanton air,
And seven or eight different dressings of other women's hair.”

So that when on a particular evening the clock had struck eight, and the Colonel was not yet in, something like consternation reigned in the kitchen, while apprehension sat in state upstairs in the drawing-room.

Dinner was served at last, and Mary sat up to it valiantly, having got over her tears in the morning, and made, during the past hour, a little resolution that while comforting her marvellously did her heart and mind credit.

How dull it was without him ! How entirely was she at a standstill now she had not

him to nag at, and nagging with Mary was a brand-new accomplishment, and, like all new requirements, required to be thoroughly well aired while it was fresh !

She had lately come near to positively hating him, yet she felt to-night how infinitely better was his despised presence than his empty chair. A little absence will sometimes serve a man in kinder stead than whole volumes of spoken excuses and repentance, and an awful thought of how she would probably dine alone for the major part of her existence (save during Tom's vacations) took the spring out of her figure and the flavor out of the food with which Fletcher, wearing an air of the deepest reproach, served her.

When she suggested that something should be kept hot for his master, he acquiesced with a reserve that said as plainly as possible : " You drove him out—how can you expect him to return ? " while his aggrieved eyes seemed to ask : " What have you been doing to our youngest child *now* ? You have upset him, and he will go without his dinner, and be made ill, and really, ma'am, consider-

ing the life you have led him lately, you had ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

“Our youngest child,” that was the Colonel’s nickname, invented by Mary in a moment of hilarity, and the name had stuck to him, and the old servants knew of it, and its suitability was thoroughly recognised by every one throughout the house.

A born student, he had been thrust, much against his will, into the army in early youth so that he found himself called upon to display those qualities in which Nature had made him most conspicuously deficient.

Alertness, smartness, punctuality—even the soldierly quality of flirtation—he had never really acquired any one of them; he had been pitchforked into his uniform, and somehow it held him up, while the duties of his position were gone through *nolens-volens*, so that it was a matter of extreme astonishment to himself, and probably his friends, when, at the age of forty-two, he found himself Colonel, and left the army on half pay.

But he had seen plenty of fighting since he so unwillingly put on his cadet’s dress, and

fight he could with a vengeance when his blood was up. His gentleness all vanished then, and many a deed of heroism had been performed by the great fellow, of which he thought nothing, but that made Mary's heart throb with pride, and which pushed him forward in the service at a rate of speed with which some of the smartest men in the service could not keep pace. So in comparatively early middle age he was able to throw aside the trappings and habits that he abhorred, and settle down with Mary among the books that he loved, books that overflowed both the town and country houses between which they passed their time very pleasantly, and without regard to those fashionable periods for migration that governed their less fortunate neighbors.

Probably no one would have called them an ideal pair, but they had been a thoroughly comfortable one, though neither was aware of how entirely indispensable one was to the other. And now, after nearly twenty years of married life, the thread of their slow-winding happiness had broken off sharp, or

rather, as Mary said to herself, it had been cut in twain by her own sharp tongue in less than a minute. But could it not be knit together again, aye, and so that the joint should be neither seen nor felt?

Mary was (that sweetest hall-mark of a noble mind) forgiving, and when Fletcher had finally shut the door on her, with a subdued sternness that said he shut her in to her own reflections, and much consolation might they bring her, she began to make excuses for her absent man until gradually all his faults dwindled, and were swallowed up in the enormity of her own.

Even Lady Blanche receded, and only that morning she had seemed to stand there in the very flesh between husband and wife! And if a woman ever has any doubt about possessing a heart, let her be really jealous. Then a long, darting skewer will run through a bit of her anatomy, and she will *know*.

“To-day is Friday,” said Mary, absently, her eyes wandering round the home-like room, in which the very pictures seemed to have suddenly put on unfamiliar faces, “and

everything always goes wrong with me on a Friday. If I die on a Friday respectably in my bed, I shall be very much astonished, but if I am *buried* on a Friday, my coffin is sure to be a misfit!"

She smiled ruefully, and then took herself short up for that smile, for she was matronly in her way, very matronly indeed for thirty-eight, which is only the age of a gay young frisker, as married women now-a-days go. Only Mary did not frisk, possessed no curling-tongs, and made home her hobby, and if she sometimes looked approvingly at a smart man, only did so wistfully, wishing that she could make her husband smart and well set-up also. But, alas! once released from martial restraints and the vigilance of an army tailor, Colonel Anderson subsided into one of those well-clad, but ill-knit figures, that have always the appearance of wanting stitches taken up everywhere, and gradually it became his wife's and Fletcher's incessant care to make him look respectable, and try their level best to keep him so.

Somehow his cravats always would gravi-

tate to one side, his collar-stud invariably revolted and gave way, the polish disappeared from his hat when not a drop of rain was falling, and a mysterious dust collected over his clothes, perhaps from the book-stalls over which he might often be found poring, and whence he brought home large volumes lovingly hugged up to his breast.

“It ain’t no good,” soliloquised Fletcher dejectedly, one day when, having brushed up his absent-minded master to the last point of respectability, he watched him down the street, “he’s just like a baby, wash him up, dress him, make him as nice as a new pin—and down he sits and makes mud-pies—*bless* him!” he added, fervently, with that accent of loyal devotion used by most people in speaking of John Anderson.

Mary thought of his little faults and weaknesses, and of how lovable he was with them all, as she sat twisting her wedding keeper round and round the finger that had certainly got a little thinner during the past weeks.

Very few women wear keepers now ; is it because a wedding-ring is a mere accidental

thing, and liable to slip off at a moment's opportunity, or because there is so little to keep, or nothing much worth keeping?

She thought of the gradual change that had come over him of late, of how easily she had discovered that he was hiding something from her of which he was both sorry and ashamed, so that often he found it impossible to meet her eyes with those blue ones of his, that were usually guileless as a child's.

Tom used to say that to draw his father's attention to outside matters when he was engaged in abstruse meditation was like watching the dawn of reason in the eyes of a baby; first a gleam, then a slow wavering light, then partial comprehension, and finally a satisfied and clear awakening.

This absence of mind made him peculiarly liable to imposture of all descriptions, and Mary viewed his occasional visits to the City with the deepest mistrust, for if he *did* get an idea, poor innocent, it was pretty sure to be a wrong one, and tolerably certain to bring him to grief. These visits, however, had lately been entirely overlooked in Mary's

dumfounded amazement at one day finding him tucked comfortably into Lady Blanche Jessup's ingle-nook, a cup of tea in one hand, a piece of muffin in the other, and upon his comely face a look of complete satisfaction such as latterly it had never worn at home.

"John!" she gasped, but the deluded man had not even the grace to seem ashamed of himself, and presently she found that this dropping-in process had been going on a considerable time, and in telling her Lady Blanche had laughed—not triumphantly, but as if she were intensely amused at either husband or wife—possibly both.

And one or two men standing about—the usual cut of Lady Blanche's men, which John Anderson was *not*—had smiled, and then been ashamed of themselves, seeing the color rise in the cheeks, and tears in the eyes of the dear little woman to whom Colonel Anderson evidently belonged by law.

But afterwards when Mary, grieved and hurt, had asked him why he could not come home to drink his tea with her as usual, he

had actually informed her that he found Lady Blanche's chimney-corner a nice, cosy, soft nest to creep into occasionally, that *there* he got smiles and pleasant words, for she had a knack of making a man thoroughly comfortable.

Mary had smiled a little bitterly at this.

O, yes! No doubt Lady Blanche had warmed many a man at that ingle-nook, and not cold men, or hungry men either, but rich men, easy men, who were only too pleased to supply the many costly wants of the tall, black-eyed woman, who knew how to make a pet of, and put on good terms with himself any man on earth—every man save her husband!

Lady Blanche was a bit of a gambler on the Stock Exchange, and occasionally carried on some exceedingly risky operations, in which, or report lied, she lost none of her own, and a great deal of her friends' money, and Mary, though not at all conversant with current *chroniques scandaleuses*, was aware of this, and knew that her husband's pocket stood in equal danger with his heart.

And she naturally disliked and mistrusted this emphatically nineteenth century woman, with whom she had never been on terms of more than slight acquaintance, and with whom she had not an idea or taste in common; while no doubt from the bottom of her soul the other despised one who could be perfectly charming and lovable, but never by any possibility "smart," that word of magic which covers with its ægis every mad, wicked, and outrageous act that a woman now-a-days can commit. And in thinking of her to-night, Mary could not imagine where the attraction in her lay for John Anderson.

Long as she had looked into that simple, sincere, faithful soul, she had found only reverence for good women and pity, but no contempt for bad ones, and so far as she could tell, only two human figures had loomed large through the abstraction in which he lived and they were herself and their only surviving son, Tom.

Tom! The thought of him struck Mary suddenly as of some one she had forgotten to

reckon with—what would he say, what explanation could she make that would not cover her with ridicule or, on the other hand, hold his father up to that sweeping condemnation which only youth knows adequately how to feel or express for the faults of its elders? And then she consoled herself by thinking that Tom would never know, of course; this quarrel, the first big one of over twenty-years of married life, would all be done with before to-morrow morning, and she and John would kiss each other, and perhaps love each other better than ever, for in her heart she did not, could not believe he loved Lady Blanche, and his sternness that morning had worn as much the livery of innocence as guilt.

She lingered so long over her thoughts, where she sat, dreading to face the empty drawing-room upstairs, that Fletcher, who had preserved a lofty air of injury below stairs, given vent to various oracular utterances, carefully in the plural, about women and their "strange" ways, brought coffee to her there, and the letters that had come by the evening post. She looked up with a

smile as the man came in, a smile that in his heart he thought most unbecoming under the circumstances, and which he met with a severe expression of disapproval.

It was just like a woman he thought, to drive a man out, and then alter all her usual habits because she could not support life without his company—exactly like a woman—like his own wife, for instance.

Mary took a sip of coffee, glancing uninterestedly at the letters that lay on the white cloth, than gave a cry of pleasure, for there was one from Tom, and several obvious cards of invitation, and one other letter that immediately fascinated her attention, there was such an air of business, legal business, about it.

What possible business could there be for any one to write to her about? And she knew even less of business than the “youngest child.”

There was a fatherly old lawyer who attended to all the money affairs of these two babes in the wood, and managed indeed very excellently for them, and if he ever wrote, it

was to the husband, not the wife, and this was not his handwriting.

And John had said that morning, he was going to his solicitors . . . she repeated the words over in a strange little whisper to herself, and this letter was not from them . . . what could it be? She stretched her hand out at last, and took it. As she read its contents, a horrible, creeping feeling seemed to stir though her brain, and a coldness as of death numbed her fingers and spread upwards to her heart. She read it once, knowing what it was, but not understanding. She read it a second time without believing what it said, then came complete comprehension, and she sat as one who no longer breathed, frozen in her place.

It was from a firm of lawyers whose name she had never heard, and it was very short, very much to the purpose, and almost brutal in its plainness.

It said that Colonel Anderson had that day requested them to draw up a deed of separation between him and his wife, by which her own income and Pigeonwick were to be hers,

for her separate use and maintenance, out of which were to be defrayed the expenses of Mr. Tom Anderson, now at Oxford. That the house in Harley Street, with its contents, save such things as actually belonged to herself, were to belong solely to the Colonel, also his income from half-pay, and all private property whatsoever. Such servants as she required, Mrs. Anderson was desired to select, and take with her to Pigeonwick, and finally she was courteously desired to make all her arrangements as speedily as possible, as Colonel Anderson had arranged to go abroad immediately.

Oh ! with what cruel, what indecent haste was he hurrying to be rid of her, giving not even time to her in which to draw breath !

The humble words of prayer for forgiveness that had trembled all that day on Mary's lips were driven back and choked by the deep burning sense of injustice succeeding that first speechless anguish in her soul. . . . would he have dared to turn even a servant out so abruptly, without giving her a chance of

begging forgiveness for the fault she had committed?

But a wife is an upper servant who cannot even claim the right of giving or receiving a month's warning, who has no wages, no perquisites, and is never expected to be ill, or cross or unfit for her duties from year's end to year's end.

Mary had for some time ceased to tremble, and now she rose up and walked, with the dignity that sometimes comes with a great calamity, upstairs.

It seemed to her that she stayed for hours upon hours in the dainty rooms, sweet with flowers and gay with the many gleanings of a delightful taste, and the treasures that accumulate naturally in a house that has been dwelled in many years.

There hung *his* portrait, as good-looking and sweet-tempered a young fellow then as ever wore the uniform of the "Pinks." Yonder were the miniatures of the children who had died, and of the little girl, over whose death John had grieved most of all, and a lock of whose hair he wore always next his heart.

Mary looked at them all, with that proud anger still in her breast, and Lady Blanche's face very clear and distinct before her, and when at last she went upstairs, she was proud and angry and irreconcilable still, and it was with a sense of relief that, missing her maid, Mrs. Fletcher, she remembered she had given the woman a holiday to go into the country to see her child, remaining until the next day.

When she had got into her dressing-gown, and was brushing out her abundant, curly brown hair, she suddenly heard some one moving softly in the adjoining dressing-room, and stood still, with beating heart to listen.

It was not John, but Fletcher.

She opened the door partly, and called to him.

"What are you doing, Fletcher?" she said.

"I have had a telegram from master, ma'am, saying he would be very late, and I had better prepare the dressing-room for him to-night."

She shut the door softly, and went back.

CHAPTER IV.

“Put a stop to our suspicions with which we babble against each other, and blend us with the balsam of friendship.”

ARISTOPHANES.

It was two o'clock in the morning, and Mary was standing by the half-opened window, listening to the last echoes of the night traffic dying away.

She was sorry when it ceased, for, all alone in body and spirit as she was, the hum and movement, the life that beat in such full current without, insensibly soothed her, and when the last sound had ceased, her ears ached with listening for more.

She knew now that her wicked, passionate words that morning were not to blame for the judgment that had fallen upon her.

True she had flown in the face of Providence, and Providence, if it does sometimes seem to smile at your folly and lead you on

to worse errors, mostly slaps you soundly in the face before it has done, and she richly deserved a lesson, but not such punishment as this.

One of the ancients urges that a man shall not be hanged for a fault that only requires a whipping, and Mary knew that something far deeper than mere exasperation at her temper had made John Anderson take her at her word, and bind her to her own decision with such cruel swiftness.

He loved the other woman so much that he could not make a pretence even of tolerating his wife, and was resolved to go to the devil his own way, obstinate foolish mortal that he was, but was it not her duty to drag him out of danger, just as one would save a child who blundered headlong into it?

Should a good woman leave a man for a single fault—a fault to which his whole stainless life gave the lie? No, no, a thousand times no! It is a woman's noblest mission to forgive, and forgive she must and will even unto seventy times seven if she be worthy of the name.

“For better, for worse.” She repeated the words over to herself, and if a wife deserted husband, or husband wife, when either most needed a strong arm to save, then the marriage service was null and void, and the vows deliberately made were deliberately broken.

She would not stand on the bank and see him drown before her eyes, sucked into the whirlpool of Lady Blanche’s cast-off, ruined lovers. She would plead with him, she would pray him for Tom’s sake as well as her own to overcome this worse than folly, and return to her, and the company of those beloved books, which he had of late so entirely neglected.

And no greater proof of the utter upheaval of his life could have been found than in this total abstention from his one luxury, just as Mary’s irritable ways and sharp tongue were an altogether new departure from her usually sweet, reasonable ways; but he must love her—O! yes! he could not so quickly unlearn the lesson of over twenty years. . . .

How she repented now of her temper, how she longed to call back every unkind word she had spoken; and all the memories

that bind a good woman to the husband of her youth thronged about her, and cried out to her with her dead children's voices, and seemed to touch her with the cherub hands that had faltered and slipped all too soon away from him and from her.

She paused before her dressing-case, and, almost without thinking, pulled out the secret drawer, and drew from it a packet of letters that had lain there many years.

She untied the ribbon, and they fell apart, showing the writing here and there. The first that she took into her hand commenced "My little one," and she laid it down, and looked at the next, beginning "My little beauty," and so on to another with "My little darling," at its head, and then she glanced at the signatures, which were one and all simply, "Your Jo, John."

"*Little*," she said to herself, as she stood glancing through them, "that is the ruling idea, that is always a man's idea of what is lovable and sweet, that is why many a man who is satisfied with his wife, yet turns his head to admire the beauty of some *little* face—a girl's

face—that is why he ceases to pay so many compliments to his wife as she grows older, because she has grown bigger, and her face has broadened out—it is the *little* one that he fancies, and remembers.

“ And I have grown middle-aged, and am too plump—that is the only fault he ever used to find with me—and I don’t please his taste any longer. It’s odd that the untidy, clothes-horse sort of men are usually better judges of women and more fastidious in their taste than the well set-up fellows who love their looking-glasses better than their souls! ”

There was no sound now in the street below, save some steps that at regular intervals passed the house, and seemed to come back again, then again return, and she said to herself idly it must be the policeman on his beat, and she was glad he stayed so near.

But presently the steps ceased altogether, and not long afterwards Mary heard a movement in the next room, and her heart bounded, for she knew that it was John.

She stood looking at the closed door that suddenly struck her as an offence to herself,

for had he not practically ordered Fletcher to shut it?

Why was it shut? What had she done that it should be closed upon her? Then love conquered pride, and she took one timid step forward—only one—and in the same moment heard the key turn in the lock.

Then indeed Mary forgot to be good, and soared high on a wave of passion and wounded pride, that when it had spent itself in dumb fury left her shocked and ashamed at her own capacity for evil, and yet for all her shame so hardened that no power on earth would have induced her now to take another single step towards reconciliation.

Locked out of his heart, locked out of his room, as though she were a guilty creature, a thing accursed, when she had tried with all her strength to put self by and do her duty. . .

Cold and calm she extinguished the light, and laid her down to sleep.

Morning found her sleepless, but still calm, for now pride had so entirely encased her heart that it was beyond the possibility of pain to wound it.

CHAPTER V.

“Nature has given to men one tongue, but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak.”

—EIPCTETUS.

MARTHA FLETCHER was brushing out her mistress's hair before the mirror, and glancing from time to time at the pale, composed face before her.

She had returned early in the day, and to her astonishment found Mrs. Anderson not yet down, though that lady had long ago taken her breakfast in bed, and was moving about her room putting things together here and there, either as if she meant to re-arrange them, or to take a journey.

Fletcher had not condescended to enlighten his wife as to the state of affairs.

Between this pair had waged ever since their marriage (Martha had been maid to Mary for twenty years, Fletcher valet to his

master for about the same time, and they had married from sheer propinquity) a never ending duel as to which should be master, and after ten steady years of quietly vigorous efforts on both sides, they were wary combatants still—and stood even.

Mary, secure in her own happiness, had watched with varying emotions the tactics of the opposing parties, but concern had at last given place to an intense amusement that she often shared with Tom, whispering into his ear any particularly diverting skirmish between the pair reported to her by Martha.

True, Fletcher had the great advantage of being a man, and therefore superior to nerves. and a thousand feminine weaknesses, but on the other hand Martha was much sharper of wit and more agile of tongue (naturally), so that often she got the advantage of him, though his impenetrable front did not suffer her fully to enjoy the fruits of victory.

Martha did not flirt, did not live to dress, and consequently had plenty of spare time in which to walk about, and *talk*—talk to a man

who seldom or never answered her. There lay the sting—if only he would talk too!

A woman of Martha's class usually talks *about* a man before she is married, and *at* him afterwards, and if she pens all her grievances up in her throat, they eat inwards to her heart like a moral cancer that in time will kill her, but a man does not recognize the healthfulness of such a safety-valve; he curses only her garrulousness, and does not feel enough (as a rule) to want to talk about it, or think enough to do himself an injury. And Fletcher profoundly despised women. He had gone so far as to tell his wife on one occasion that for *his* part he considered he and master got on much better as bachelors, while she and her mistress were away, than when they were both at home.

Mary had laughed, and always took Fletcher's part when Martha railed about him, knowing that the little woman really adored him with all her heart.

Only she would not be mastered, Martha was resolved on that point. Why should she? She was every bit as good as he was—and

better. Certainly she never bore any malice, and you can always trust a woman who bangs a door in a rage, but beware of the one who goes out quietly and squeezes the door handle.

"I don't *understand* the men," Martha would say, rolling her nice round arms up in her pink cotton sleeves, "I can't make them out, ma'am, and that's the truth."

And she would adduce such a long list of men who made their wives' lives a misery to them, till Mary would come to the conclusion that it must be true, only *she* had the one exception to the rule.

Weak indeed, she knew John to be, but lovable as all weak things are, and probably the men who get the best sort of love from women, the divinest and noblest and most enduring, are those who arouse the protective instinct in a woman's mind. It is by no means the best sort of woman who makes a good slave and follows blindly her leader.

Martha's bosom was this morning evidently bursting with a grievance, and presently out it came.

“What do you think, ma’am?” she said, as she began to pile Mary’s hair up, “I’d hardly got into the house, when Fletcher told me that he knew me by my waddle right from the other end of the street. As if such a scare-crow of a man oughtn’t to be thankful to have married something comfortable. Dear me, how these tall, thin people do fancy themselves!”

Mary smiled faintly as she looked at the two reflections in the glass.

Mistress and maid were both brown-haired blue-eyed, beautifully-complexioned, both were round and soft and cosy-looking, but Mary was the taller by at least three inches. Both were domesticated women, with no interests whatever save home ones, and each had an only child whom she adored, and was a mother to the heart’s core.

Tom was nearly always away, and little Molly lived in the country with her grandparents, but mistress and maid often talked of their children together, and were thoroughly good friends at all points.

“Martha,” she said, suddenly, “would you

mind being away from Fletcher for—for a time? ”

Martha started, and looked apprehensively in the glass.

“ You’re not going to send him away Ma’am, are you? ” she said, the corners of her mouth falling, “ he’s got his faults I know, but he is a good servant, and serves you and master faithfully.”

“ Especially his master,” said Mary, grave and pale. “ No, I have no idea of his leaving his master. But I am going to Pigeonwick, Martha, for an indefinite time ” (her blue eyes met the other astonished blue ones in the glass), “ and I should want to take you with me, and of course your master could not do without Fletcher.”

Martha went on mechanically and blunderingly putting in hairpins.

Her mind was in a whirl, her thoughts were chaos—it was natural enough to her to live with Fletcher on the terms she did, but a quarrel between her master and mistress—one that entailed a division of household and dwelling-place—she thought she must be

dreaming till her eyes fastened on the sternness of Mary's face, and then real concern moved her.

"Ma'am," she said, "you're not angry with master, are you? And him so helpless and almost as if he was a baby, looking to you and depending on you for everything! Why he's just lost without you, and goodness knows where he'd wander if he hadn't got you to come home to!"

"He has wandered far enough while I am here," thought Mary, bitterly, but aloud she said, "and I am going as soon as possible. Indeed, I have set my heart on going within three days: so you must work hard, Martha, and I will help you to pack up."

Martha rolled a bewildered eye round the pretty room, then sighed hopelessly, as if Mary had talked of packing up and removing the world, and said, "You mean, ma'am, just your linen and clothes as usual?"

"No—I mean *everything*—everything that is mine, but nothing, remember, Martha, *nothing*, not a stick or atom of anything belonging to Colonel Anderson."

She had risen, and as she turned, faced that shut door, which mutely proclaimed her disgrace (but the key of which was now on her own side), and her soft mouth hardened as she looked at it.

"Of course, Martha," she said, "you can remain here if you can't bear to leave Fletcher—but if so, you would have to cook for your master. In that case I should take the cook and Polly with *me*."

"As if I should leave you, ma'am," said Martha indignantly, and thinking that, after all, this would probably blow over in no time, and everything be comfortable as before; "and the place will be looking lovely now; and you haven't been well lately, ma'am, and the change will do you good."

Mary did not seem to hear her; she was looking at a row of miniatures that she had unhooked from the wall, and that now lay on a table near.

Those little golden heads, all gone, how she had longed once to put weights on them to keep them down, because she thought they would grow up too fast, and slip away from

her, and God had decreed that they should never grow up or sin, or suffer, but be always her own little children clinging to her with little warm loving ways that now she must forever go cold without.

Only Tom was left. Tom, whom year after year she watched, reckoning each day as one more in which he was granted to her, yet seeing always his dead face lying in the coffin, as one after the other she had seen the rest.

Probably she could never have brought herself to think or say as our own Princess Alice so nobly did when her child met his most cruel death,—“that she only thanked God for having spared him to her so long,” but she blessed Heaven every day for leaving her yet a mother.

Martha came near and looked over her mistress's shoulder.

“Do you remember, ma'am,” she said, “how when Miss Dolly lay in her little coffin, master lifted you out of your bed and carried you to her side that you might lay the flowers about her pretty face?”

Mary did not stir.

“And how Master Duckie, when he was dying—so strong he was for all the fever—put out his hand, and pushed one of your hairpins back into place, when you were leaning over him?”

Mary turned abruptly away, her hands clenched, and a spasm of mortal agony convulsing her features.

Did she not remember? Oh God! And she *would* not remember . . . She had work to do, and it must be done quickly, or not at all.

“And now, Martha,” she said quietly, “we will begin to pack.”

CHAPTER VI.

“We certainly ought not to treat living creatures like shoes or household goods, which, when worn out with use, we throw away ; and were it only to learn benevolence to human kind, we should be merciful to other creatures.”

PLUTARCH.

“WHAT is the meaning of it all ?” said Martha, as she shut herself smartly into that temple devoted to silver, glass, and such-like, which Fletcher looked upon as his special sanctum, and in which he hated to be disturbed.

“Matter ?” said Fletcher, with a snarl, as he lifted his bald head and tall thin person from over the silver spoons he was rubbing furiously—“it means that missus has just worn master’s patience out at last, and he’s made up his mind to live by hisself—small blame to him.”

This was only a guess, and he looked keenly at Martha to see if he were correct.

“Pooh !” said Martha, taking a seat with an air that meant aggravation. “It’s missus

won't stay with him, you mean. A nice poor stick he'd be without *her* to bolster him up! But what's he been doing, I wonder? I shouldn't have thought he'd got spirit enough to get into a scrape!"

Fletcher snorted violently, nodding his head up and down, and at the same time contriving to shake it, in a peculiarly irritating manner.

"You needn't look like a fool, if you are one," said Martha, comfortably, "and if you think you'll be able to do anything with master, keep him tidy, or happy when missus is gone, you're mistaken. You'll just be two doddering old fools, trying to prop each other up, and both coming to the ground."

Fletcher laughed shortly, and flew at a silver tankard, expending upon it an enormous amount of superfluous elbow-grease.

"Those baggages in the kitchen don't know anything about it?" said Martha, with a sudden change of tone.

"Who's to tell 'em?" said Fletcher, scornfully, "unless it's you or me? And can't missus go to her country house on a visit without folks talking? *Our* family ain't none

of those wretched fashionable folk as lives for society, and that rot—and you had better take Cook and leave Polly. Polly and me can manage quite comfortable for master.”

“Can you?” said Martha, fiercely, and growing extremely red. She would never admit it, but she was really intensely jealous of Fletcher, and greatly overrated the charms of his elegant manners (upstairs) and decidedly distinguished, appearance.

And Polly was one of those jades to whom Providence gives dimples, and nothing else—and uncommonly well do they seem to thrive on them!

“Missus will have to decide that,” she said, after a considerable pause, “and I shouldn’t be surprised if she takes Polly as housemaid, and engages a new cook to go to the Wick. You haven’t even asked how Kitty is?” she added in an aggrieved voice,

“How is she?” said Fletcher, in whom the paternal feelings were not at all strongly developed.

“As pretty as paint.”

“That’s all you women think about. How’s her temper? That’s more to the point.”

“Well,” said Martha judiciously, “her temper ain’t up to her looks, and that’s a fact. But girls always take after their fathers. But she sleeps well and eats well—like you—she hasn’t got brain enough for it to give her much trouble. Now there’s Master Tom see how bright and lively he is—just like his mother! *He* don’t want dry-nursing, and when he *does* get a wife I believe he’ll know how to behave to her!”

“That’ll depend on who he marries,” said Fletcher, still wrestling with his chamois leather.

“But come now,” said Martha, who was as really anxious to get at the rights of the matter as Fletcher was secretly anxious to know what Mrs. Anderson had been doing upstairs all day, “everything was all right when I went down to Kitty the day before yesterday, what has happened since?”

“Things has come to a p’int,” said Fletcher oracularly. “It’s been nag, nag, grumble, grumble, worrit, worrit, at that blessed man for *weeks*, and yesterday morning at breakfast, goodness knows for what or why, she right down upsets the appplecart, and tells him as how she is going!”

"You heard?" said Martha, with a sniffing air, peculiarly offensive.

"I ain't deaf," said Fletcher, with dignity, "and I don't carry wax in my pocket to stop my ears with when individuals talk high, and I was brushing master's coat and hat outside. When he came out, he was all trembling, and looked as white and weary as if *he'd* been a brute 'stead of her, and he went down the street hardly looking where he put his feet down. Poor thing!" added Fletcher, with a tremble in his voice that a wrathful thought soon steadied.

"And would you believe it?" he said, holding out a silver fish-slice as if it were a musket, "that when he never came home to dinner, she had the face to wonder where he was, and ackshally waited for him! Then she had the owdacity to tell me to ask the cook if she hadn't better keep something *hot* for him! Hot! as if she hadn't made everything hot enough for him for one day! I didn't even answer her, Martha, I just walked out with *indignity*!"

And so saying, with an air of nobility that would have done credit to an Italian prince,

Fletcher resumed his plebeian occupation.

Martha laughed—not unkindly—but Fletcher felt less morally elevated after that laugh than before, so he went on talking in case she should think that she had scored one over him.

“Then he sends me a wire to get his dressing-room ready—says he’ll be late. Late indeed he was—but not at his club. For hours he walked up and down, up and down the street, though I begged him to come in, and told him missis had been in bed ever since eleven.”

Fletcher paused and chucked his head sardonically.

“Just to think of it,” he said. “Him as has done such deeds, and the bravest of the brave—afraid to set foot in his own house because of a woman’s tongue!”

Martha’s face was very grave now, with all the aggravation gone out of it.

“Has he been up to see missis this morning?” she said.

Fletcher shook his head.

“He breakfasted by hisself,” he said, “or

leastways, pretended to. And in the midst of it down comes Polly and says, 'If you please, sir, my mistress says she is lunching and dining out to-day, and will you please to have yours at your club?' Cool! To order a man out of his own house to get his victuals! He just turns very white and says, 'Very well.' And I'll tell you what it is, Martha—if ever a woman went and throwed her cap over the mill, throwed it farther than she'll ever pick it up again, it's that mistress of yours upstairs, that you've thought all the world of, and who ain't one pin better than the rest of your most perverting and aggerawating sex."

But Martha, having found out all she wanted to know, while withholding her own information, had slapped the door to in his face before he got to the end of his sentence.

CHAPTER VII.

“ Take nane frae Peter, nor frae Paul ;
Nane frae high or low o’ them all ;
And frae them all ye will tak’ nane,
Until it comes from the bride’s ae hand.”

THE division of household goods, of property that had hitherto been supposed to be common to husband and wife, had begun, and as the work went on, the division too of memories, of interests and blended lives was with fell and almost breathless rapidity made complete.

Not one iota of anything belonging to her husband might Mary take with her—such was the edict promulgated by his solicitors, and no scrap of anything belonging to Mary might she leave behind her, or anything belonging to Tom, who was henceforth to be practically fatherless so far as the finality of all present arrangements went.

All that was her own, or had been given

her by her husband (and her pride rebelled vigorously at the taking of these last), or had belonged to her children, Mary took, also her own portrait painted when she was a girl with bright eyes, filled full of happiness for her by "My Jo, John."

As the business of packing went on, there came swiftly over the house a deserted, uncared-for look, as if its form indeed remained, but the spirit of it was departing; and perhaps Mary, in her bitterness of heart, was not sorry to see how dull the place would be with her gracious influence removed, and the signs of her everyday occupation lacking.

Perhaps there was a touch, too, of feminine malevolence in the way she ranged the furniture in stiff and unaccustomed lines against the walls, in her stern banishment of growing green things and cheerful flowers, in the way she divorced the two chairs, always set close together in her special "corner" of the drawing-room, so that if John Anderson should come straying in after she had gone, he should be sharply reminded that she had gone forever.

The very blinds and windows testified to

the impending dissolution in the house. Usually they were drawn well up, and fresh air and sunshine raced in abundantly; but now the blinds were half-mast high, the windows only gaped in a niggardly fashion, and the breezy, sunny atmosphere habitual to the whole place was gone.

Mary felt like a stranger in her own house as she moved to and fro, or as if she had died and come back unrecognised to haunt the place in which she had been so happy, but was now forgotten, and perhaps the unreality of it all helped to keep her calm, and prevented her proud heart from giving way.

How hard, how inflexible she had grown, only Martha Fletcher knew. Martha, who was going through a great crisis in her own life also, and who was torn between the grief she dared not display, and the dignity that she felt it due to herself to display under the trying circumstances in which she found herself so unexpectedly placed.

For Fletcher had taken it entirely for granted, and as a perfect matter of course, that she should accompany her mistress to Pigeonwick; *his* duty was to his master, and

hers to Mrs. Anderson, such duties having been entered upon years before there was any question of their duty to one another, if indeed there were any, as marriage, to Fletcher, was but a trifling episode in his career.

To break such bonds would only be another, and indeed it was on record that after an especially rousing exchange of personalities, Fletcher had put on his hat with the intention of leaving her, and Martha had promptly put on her bonnet also with the intention of leaving *him*, but they had ended by divesting themselves of their head-gear with a solemnity befitting the abdication of a crown.

And now for Martha to have confessed fondness for her natural enemy would have been to confess herself beaten in the long matrimonial duel she and Fletcher had played, so Martha resolutely restrained the tears that would have intensely relieved her, kept a stiff upper lip, and a tongue in admirable working order, and worked like one possessed at the packing which Mary was so resolute to have completed within the stipulated time.

If Fletcher felt any secret qualms, if he occasionally glanced at the prospect of an

empty place hitherto occupied by a little sharp-voiced, comely woman, and thought with a man's dismay of possible buttonless shirts and unmended socks, he gave no sign, nor did he seem to concern himself at all as to whether Polly or Cook would be left behind, though this matter lay on Martha's mind night and day. Polly's dimples had never been more aggravatingly in evidence than during these last days, and as she professed moreover a wholesome hatred of the country, where areas are unknown, she was heard openly enough to declare she hoped she would be left in town to look after "master."

Martha longed to slap those saucy cheeks, and give the girl a plain piece of her mind. The cook, a middle-aged woman, was one of those persons who right through life are strictly neuter in all things—a condition of mind severely condemned by one of the sages, but useful enough for the purposes of everyday life. She objected to neither town nor country, and so long as she was comfortable, ignored the surrounding landscape, so Martha was careful to impress on her mistress that

Sarah was the very person to see after "master's" comforts at Harley Street.

"Only we want some one to cook for us," said Mary, wearily, who was indeed in no trim for the miseries of servant-hunting, and not until the very night before they were departing, did she rouse herself to say Cook was to remain, and Polly was to accompany them to Pigeonwick.

"You must manage till we get another woman," Mary said, and then Martha went off in triumph to inform Polly she was to be withdrawn from the admiring eyes of the tradesmen's young men, thereby throwing that young woman into a fit of weeping, and an ardent longing to be "even" with Mrs. Fletcher.

"She's jealous of him, that's what *she* is!" wept poor Polly afterwards in confidence to the cook. "Jealous of a bally old image like him! You'd better look out for p'ison or dynamite if you're going to stop here!"

But Sarah, who was slow of speech, and had a hearty contempt for the whole race of man, thought she would be able to take care of herself anywhere.

The lawyers brought the deed of separation hot-foot, and it had been duly signed and carried away again. Hitherto, only their own hearts had divided the pair, but now the law, or something very like it, had sundered them, yet it was John Anderson's hand, not Mary's, that faltered on writing the necessary signature.

Had she wavered once, would the issue have been the same?

But no tremor, or shadow of regret, shewed in Mary's calm face as she wrote the words that set a seal upon the abdication of all a woman's dearest most cherished rights.

CHAPTER VIII.

“He entered in his house, his home no more,
For without hearts, there is no home ;
And felt the solitude of passing his own door
Without a welcome.”

“You will go with your mistress, Fletcher.”

“Sir! *Sir!*”

“You heard me. You, your wife and Polly will accompany Mrs. Anderson to Pigeonwick, the cook will remain here to look after me. I shall only require breakfast.”

“Sir!”

Master and man looked at each other, seeming to have changed places.

It was the man who was pale, timid, appealing. John Anderson, whose resolute eyes burned steadily in his pale, composed face, while his voice had the authoritative ring of command to which, for years, his regiment had been accustomed, and which his men would no more have dared to disobey than did Fletcher now.

“ But, sir,” he pleaded, almost in tears, “ who will valet you, and look after your clothes and comforts? I’ve waited on you these twenty years, and —— ”

“ Now your duty is to your mistress—and your wife, ” added John Anderson, as an after-thought. “ And remember that I place Mrs. Anderson in your care, and shall most certainly exact an account of your stewardship. By serving her faithfully, you serve me better than you have ever done before, and believe me I shall not be ungrateful. ”

The man stood with bent head, overwhelmed.

“ And Fletcher—do not return to this house on any pretext whatever, unless I send for you. What you want can be sent after you.”

He turned away, and the man moved like one blind towards the door.

“ Fletcher ! ”

He came back and lifted his head.

John Anderson looked at him earnestly, then he stretched his hand, the man silently wrung it, and then, too really overcome to speak, retired from the room.

Colonel Anderson went out into the hall and fetched his hat and stick.

How desolate, how unutterably dreary looked the silent hall, heaped up with packages ready for departure, the *impedimenta* of a wife going forth from the home to which she had come with such high hopes years upon years ago !

He glanced up the staircase, that, too, was deserted, and no bright face looked down at him from above, then with that apathy which is the courage of desperation, he opened the front door and went out. Fletcher, downstairs, in what was really the darkest hour of his life, heard the door shut, and by intuition knew that his master had gone, and would not return again till they had all departed.

Mary, tying her bonnet-strings for the last time in her dismantled room, also heard the door close, and though she was still firm, still mistress of herself, since the hurry had been so great, and the time for reflection so short, felt herself quiver at the sound.

She knew that he had been in the house, just as he always knew also when she was in, though they never met, never crossed each

other's paths, or made a single enquiry about one another, throughout the whole three days.

Martha came in smiling.

"Oh, ma'am," she said, "master says Fletcher is to come with us—and he's getting ready now."

"He wants a free hand," thought Mary, with curling lip. "Perhaps he is going to bring her here—who knows? These smart ladies do such disgraceful things."

"Indeed," she said aloud, drawing on her gloves. "Is the carriage here?"

"No, ma'am. There's half-an-hour before starting yet," and, perhaps feeling her happiness to be indecent, Martha turned, and fairly ran out of the room. Mary smiled bitterly to herself.

So this jangling, halting, unbeautiful chain of married life was to go unbroken to the end, while the silken thread with never a knot in it, that had bound her and John Anderson together, was to snap violently asunder at the first tug, to the scorn and derision of the world!

She crossed the room, and unlocked the

dressing-room door. Bare and meagre looked the narrow bed, she thought, uncared for and deserted the whole place, and does not furniture reflect the dejected mood of its occupier? and yet Polly had swept it, and Fletcher had tidied it, and John Anderson had slept in it, for how long? She thought it must be at least a year.

A thin overcoat was lying on the back of a chair, seeming to take the lines of his gaunt figure as clothes *do* seem to catch the identity of the wearer. Obeying an uncontrollable impulse, and it was the first natural one she had known for days, she stooped down and pressed her lips to it. Through the thin cloth she felt the crackle of paper, and though she had never been one to pry into anything, she instinctively drew the letter out, and stood looking at the handwriting.

It was Lady Blanche's and she read the contents deliberately.

"My poor fellow," it ran. "Come to me at once. Can nothing be arranged?"

"Yours ever,

"BLANCHE J."

She put the letter back, and replaced the coat.

* * * * *

Dusk was falling when John Anderson lifted his latch, and came in.

The hall lamp was not lit. Through the open dining-room door he saw the table laid for one.

He passed into his study, and looked at his books — those beloved books that Mary had been so jealous of, since they robbed her of many an hour of his company! He might sit at them now as long as he liked — there was no one to rebuke him, no one to care if he did, or didn't. It was only love's eye that had wanted him, and love was gone.

There was nobody to notice now if he went out all askew, nobody to brush him up, to tell him he was a disgrace to be seen, and she wouldn't go out walking with him for *worlds* — then tie her bonnet on, and go out with him as pleased as Punch! There was no one to be sorry now and look a culprit because she had forgotten to sew on a button, for she did all those things for him herself, and never trusted the maids. Perhaps he would under-

stand soon, when no one cared how long he read, or how late he sat up, that her grumbling had sprung from love—love only—because she loved him so that she could never weary of his company, however much of it she had.

Mechanically he looked in the glass, and half lifted his hand to twist his moustachios as she liked to see them, and then he remembered, and his hand fell to his side.

The cook came awkwardly, with unaccustomed cap and apron, and called him to dinner, to which he went obediently, feeling like a stranger sitting at his own table, and with a weight of misery on his heart that rose up to meet each mouthful and nearly choked him.

What was it that he missed, and that he was so lost without?

And this is what he missed.

The little railing voice that could be so sweet and say such true and tender things . . . the officious little hand (that his own swallowed so easily) which never wearied of serving him, though often it would vex his soul by disarranging his table . . . the blithe little presence that never suffered dulness or

ennui to come nigh him, and that so amply supplemented and filled out his own quieter nature that, until it was withdrawn, he scarcely knew whence the sunshine came . . . these were some of the things that he missed.

And then ran in his head those most pathetic lines out of the Lay of Virginius :

“ And none will weep when I go forth,
Or smile when I return,
Or sit beside the old man’s hearth.”

Suddenly he sprang up, and went into his study.

There were writing materials among the litter, and he seized them and began to write.

“ MARY (he said),—You have left me, and for a reason I deplore, but it is one that I cannot alter, and I must bear the miserable consequences of it alone. God help me, for you will not, and I have been too supremely happy with you in the past to go on living beside you under our altered circumstances.

“ God bless you, good-bye,
“ Your Jo, JOHN.”

CHAPTER IX.

“But one, I wis, was not at home,
Another had paid his gold away ;
Another called him thriftless loon
And sharply bade him wend his way.”

“WHAT !” said Lady Blanche, in the tone of an avenging goddess, and rising with the port of an insulted empress.

“And people say it’s your doing,” went on her friend calmly ; “so ridiculous—as if you would take the trouble to detach such a man as that from his lawful spouse !”

“He is a very distinguished man for all his untidy looks,” said Lady Blanche, feeling this last remark to be a slur on her taste ; “but what a fool—what a fool to allow his dowdy little wife to compromise *me ! Me !*”

“Yes—it’s too bad,” said Mrs. Wentworth drily, “and you with a baby at least every two years—so respectable ! As if *any* woman who had a large family could be anything but respectable !”

"Netta!" said Lady Blanche furiously.

Netta shrugged her shoulders.

"*Adultera benefica*," she muttered under her breath, adding aloud:

"What possessed you to play off your tricks on *him*? A man as innocent as a baby—not rich—devoted to his wife——"

"So it appears," said Lady Blanche, disposing of her long limbs on a deep couch littered with cushions. "I'll tell him to fetch the little idiot back."

"It's too late!" said Netta, with a grimace; "there has been a formal separation—a division of goods and chattels—lawyers called in—and he reigns in Harley Street alone, and *she* is sniffing country breezes at Pigeonwick."

"He never told me one word about it," said Lady Blanche, in a tone of virtuous indignation.

"Do men usually talk to their wives about the other men's wives who are kind to them?" said Netta, raising enquiring eyebrows. "I fancy not, nor *vice versa*. Console yourself with the thought that you have triumphed over yet another of the sex you hate and adorn."

"I would never have allowed it," said Lady Blanche, knitting her fine brows, "I would have insisted on his coaxing the stupid, and keeping her at home. A fine thing for me to be supposed to have separated a husband and wife!"

"It isn't what we *do*, it's what the world sees us do, that matters," said Netta placidly, "and you couldn't expect that man—always tied to his wife's apron-strings—to be as *rusee* or clever as the average London man, or your usual *cicisbeos* are. Is there nothing *else* in the business, Blanche?" she added sharply and suddenly.

Lady Blanche frowned, but her eyes, those great black eyes that passion might soften, but love never, did not quail.

"Is it so strange that a man should fall in love with me?" she said, lolling on her cushions and looking "dallying and dangerous," as Walpole said of the Woffington's picture; "I'm sure I didn't ask him to—and I see that, like most fools, he will give more trouble than forty knaves rolled into one. People think there *must* be something wrong when a

woman s admired by a man whose wife has left him——”

“ Then why, don’t you drop him ? ” said Netta with an innocent air.

“ Because——” Lady Blanche had the grace to color a little through her rich skin, “ there are—are reasons, why I must let him down gently, but down he shall come all the same. Meanwhile I shall pack him off to that place in the country with the rural name ” ——(“ Troory-roory,” murmured Netta sleepily) ——“ and insist on his bringing her back.”

“ Supposing she won’t come ? ” said Netta.

“ Oh ! those dowdies are so unused to being flattered that she’ll cave in at the first word. And really I’ve done with him—and he bores me to extinction.”

“ Mrs. Anderson is a quiet little woman, certainly,” said Netta, “ but she doesn’t strike me as being quite as characterless as you suppose. I’ll bet you a pony she doesn’t come back ! ”

“ Done ! ” said Lady Blanche, producing her tablets and noting the bet.

“ And will you pay if you lose ? ” asked

Netta incredulously, as she arose and surveyed herself in a long glass near.

“ Really—honor bright.”

Lady Blanche had drawn her long, lazy limbs together, and was now standing up, and towering half a foot above her friend.

“ I’ll give you a week,” said Netta briskly, “ a week in which you have to wheedle *him* to return to the wife of his bosom, and in which he has to wheedle *her* to return to his. But I think, Blanche, I *think*, that you’ll lose ! ”

“ O ! no ! ” said Lady Blanche calmly, as she lifted her grand arms to put in place a plait of her black hair ; “ he does everything I tell him—everything—and he believes I am an angel—still ! ”

“ *Nous verrons*,” said Netta, who had done preening herself before the mirror. “ Good-bye, dear—is that Fitzwalter’s voice ? H’m *He* is no fool anyway.” And she paused at the door to look back. “ You’ll never impose on him as you’ve done on honest John Anderson—or fleece him either,” she added to herself as she went out.

CHAPTER X.

“What a man should learn is to regret all that is useless in remembrance, and to retain with cheerfulness all that can profit and amend.”

PETRARCH.

“MOTHER!”

“Yes, Tom?”

“The poor old dad must have gone off his chump!”

“Not a bit of it. He was more reasonable, and standing more by himself, you know, Tom, than he has done for years.”

Mother and son, who had been walking along comfortably, with their arms round each other's shoulders, stood stock-still to look at one another, and woman-like she suddenly observed how much bigger and broader he had grown, and exclaimed, at the change in him:

“Tom,” she said, wistfully, “it seems yesterday that you were a boy, a little innocent boy, depending on me for everything, and now

you are grown up, and soon you will have secrets of your own—like your father—and be getting a wife, and of course you will like her best. Do you remember," she added, in that tone of eager looking-back which is never used by a woman who is happy in the present, "how you asked me once which I loved best, grandma or you? I said '*you*,' and was rebuked by your telling me that 'one should always love one's *mother* best!'"

"Dear little mother," said Tom, kissing her tenderly, "and so I always shall—at least till I find someone better than you."

They had come out for a walk and a talk together, choosing the path to the wood, and under other circumstances Mary in such company would have been enjoying herself down to the ground.

The thrill, the warmth of early Summer rose in the air, nightingales hid in the thickets, the fugitive cry of the cuckoo was abroad, blossoms hung on the boughs, and through the short turf thrust the now modest, now splendid heads of flowers, that made a finer mosaic than the rarest marbles and jewels ever put together by cunning human hands.

Mary leaned her head for a moment on Tom's broad shoulder. It was so sweet to be petted once more, to have someone to love and to love her, and she had hitherto refrained from any such sympathy, and never told Tom a word of the state of affairs till he came up for a few days' holiday.

"I never cry, Tom," she said, looking at him with eyes that had something strained in them, "I can't—it is all too dreadful."

Tom hugged her again, then picked a cow-slip to add to the flowers in her hand they had gathered as they came along, and she smiled at it absently and without pleasure, for the sense of smell is curiously dependent on one's state of mind.

"It beats my comprehension," said Tom, drawing his young brows into a straight line, while his ruddy, beardless face tried to lengthen itself and failed, "but how did it all happen?"

They had reached the wood now, and sat down on a felled tree close to a silver-barked beech, whose twigs were yet swelling with brown buds, left behind laggards in the race

that had been run by elm and oak and hawthorn when they rushed out into green.

"You know, Tom," said Mary, her tired eyes roving from the wind flowers to that delicate white wonder of the woods whose trefoil leaves are folded like a heart, "your father was always quiet and absent-minded, but for weeks past he has become so silent and self-absorbed that there was no getting a word out of him, and then he took to going out by himself, and, when I asked him, would not tell me where he went, and got quite snappish and—and rude, Tom, positively rude."

"Worried about something," said Tom, thoughtfully.

"And he would not answer me, Tom—always answer your wife, dear, when you have got one, unless you wish to drive her mad—and always, *always* give her the last word."

"I think dad always let you have *that*, mother," said Tom, smiling broadly.

"But I behaved very badly that day—the day a separation was agreed upon," said Mary, hanging her head and flushing vividly. "I

—I actually asked him to *hit* me, Tom, that I might get a divorce!”

“*Mother!*”

“Yes, Tom—may Heaven forgive me! Did ever you know such an unwomanly woman? And I said—O! I thought it clever then, but I see now how vulgar it was—I told him that after all I didn’t want a divorce, as I might get married again, and I didn’t want to make a second mistake!”

Tom put up his hand to hide a grin, he thought his mother had been “going it” with a vengeance.

“Dad knew you didn’t mean it,” he said soothingly. “It isn’t your way of talking at all. But has it struck you, mother,” he added with sudden gravity, “that perhaps father has been losing money? You know if our youngest child *does* get an idea into his head, it is generally a wrong one!”

“No,” said Mary, with her head in the air, “it has not struck me at all. Mr. Goldsworthy has managed our affairs for years, and he would never allow it. No, it is nothing about money.”

Mary, like most women, would prefer to

hear that her husband had lost every sixpence that he possessed rather than know that the smallest corner of his heart had been filched from her by another woman.

"Then what *have* you quarrelled about, mother?" said Tom, point blank.

Mary blushed.

How could she tell this boy that his father was treating her so ill? Naturally he loved his mother best, and the words would stick in her throat.

"Your father does not care for me any longer," she said, in a low voice, her eyes fixed on the blossoming earth. "He was willing that we should separate, he hurried it up as fast as he could, and I don't believe he breathed freely till I was packed out of the place, and sent here, like a naughty child in disgrace!"

"But, mother," said Tom. helplessly, "dad simply *adores* you, he thinks of no one on earth but you, and he did not even take me into a moment's consideration. There must be some frightful misunderstanding somewhere."

"No," said Mary doggedly, "there is none."

"He never even cared to cultivate his friends," went on Tom. "He seldom spoke to a man, and never *looked* at a woman."

Mary's cheeks flamed and her eyes flashed, thereby letting in light on Tom's not altogether unsophisticated mind.

"Wh-e-w!" he whistled. "Why, mother," and he began to laugh softly as at an irresistibly absurd idea, "fancy the poor old dad *flirting*! Why he doesn't even know the way! And if he did, he's much too lazy to take the trouble!"

Mary made no reply, and tried not to look unutterable things.

"I think, Tom," she said, after a little pause, "that some weak people find courage to do things that strong people are positively afraid to do, and they *will* go on doing it too perseveringly, though they know it is wrong, and they suffer horribly for it right away through."

Tom's face had grown very grave, even stern, at his mother's words.

"If father has been serving you badly, mother" he said hotly, then paused abruptly. It was an upside-downness of everything that

the "youngest child," the care of the whole establishment, should have revolted against the love that had always surrounded him, and that he should hanker after strange women was past Tom's comprehension.

"Mother dear," he said, "you have got some wrong idea in your head, and that you wrong father, I am certain. It is much more likely that he has lost money, and is afraid and ashamed to tell you, but feels he cannot be with you and keep it back."

"No," said Mary very distinctly, "it is no mistake, and I read her letter, and he wrote to me admitting it, and asking me to forgive him. But I have not forgiven him, and I will not. Only you must not be unkind to him, Tom, for it is no sin against you—none at all. Pick me that hyacinth over there—how blue it is! Look at the light falling on that glade and thicket. I ought to be happy here, ought I not? With such walks and drives—such a delicious little house, and my own mistress, Tom, just as if I were a widow, indeed! But I've found out, Tom," she added wistfully, "that even this wood and all the loveliness around will not satisfy me. Nature leaves

you out in the cold, somehow, and you must admire her in couples to get the human touch into your love for her. I suppose that is why people all migrate to the big cities, they must be with their own kind or they perish."

"Mother!" said Tom distressfully, and looking anxiously at the slender hand that she had slipped into his, and which had grown so thin that the rings were slipping off it.

"And when your vacation comes we will have fine times together. It is like a glimpse of heaven your being here for these few days," she went on with feverish hurry, "and, oh, Tom! it's so good to have some one to speak to besides servants!"

"But there are neighbours," said Tom, looking up at the clouds drifting across the vivid blue, and thinking, though he was by no means poetical, that even so were the first clouds drifting across his own sunny life, "don't they call?"

"They called, of course," said Mary, holding up her head like a child in disgrace who knows it is the "the other one" who deserves whipping, "and they enquired for your father,

and I have seen them whispering together at church, and I can see as plain as a pikestaff that they think me a deserted woman. People always take it for granted it is the woman's fault, chiefly, I suppose, because they don't expect anything of a man, and so are not disappointed."

"Mother," cried Tom, "you are growing bitter—not like you. And as to the people, let 'em talk" he added robustly, "and the world let it howl! It howls outside, not in. If you have comfort and warmth and love indoors——"

"But I have not," almost whispered poor Mary.

"Sit inside, and laugh! What's the world?" continued the young philosopher, contemptuously. "Will it feed you, clothe you, warm you, bury you? Not much. But it will take the last morsel of cake out of your mouth to feed itself, and handsomely provide you with a character that might be that of your worst enemy for all the resemblance it bears to yourself!"

"Really, Tom!" said Mary laughing a little, as the young fellow paused for breath,

"Oxford is certainly expanding your idea's. But you are a little hard on the world, after all. What is it composed of but suffering, erring creatures like ourselves, who may be in worse trouble than ourselves, at any moment, or who may die even while they are blaming or pitying us, and so it is our turn to pity *them*? It isn't the outside opinion I feel, Tom, it's the loneliness in the house, by the hearth, and *here*,"—she pressed her hand upon her breast as if to hold down her heart.

"Little mother," said Tom, to whom the sunshine had suddenly grown dim, and all the loveliness around a mere callous hard-eyed selfishness, that understood nothing of human misery, "I shall leave Oxford and come home to you."

"And spoil your career?" said Mary calmly, and blaming herself bitterly for having loosed the vials of her speech and sorrow. "Never! I shall do very well here till you come back, and your Aunt Mamie is coming home next month. She will come straight to me, of course."

"Then I shall go to father," said Tom resolutely, "and get to the bottom of this miser-

able affair. I'll *never* believe that dad looked at any other woman but you, or that so true a gentleman as he is, could behave as you think he has done."

"Think?" said Mary fiercely. "Look here, Tom. There's an old proverb, 'Twixt bough and trunk place not the finger,' and you must not interfere in this thing—I will not have it. If you brought your father down to me to-morrow, I would walk out of the house rather than the same roof should cover us."

Mary had risen, and was walking rapidly homewards, just as if the delicious winding ways of the glades were not set thick with loveliest surprises, not one of which would last year have failed to ravish her happy eyes.

"But I shall go all the same," said young Tom to himself, nodding as he followed her, "and if they won't kiss and be friends, I shall just chuck up the 'varsity and come home and take care of mother."

CHAPTER XI.

“Ye sae ye are a courteous knight,
But I think ye are nane,
I think ye’re but a miller lad,
By the color o’ your claething.”

THE windows at Pigeonwick were all open, and the sleepy, hot summer air might have lulled to slumber any worker, tired in brain or limb, who found himself stretched in a rocking-chair beneath the wide verandah that extended round three sides of the house.

But the two women who had been resting all day, who were tired of rest, and wanted life and movement instead, and who dreaded the long hours of the summer night, held no sleep between their eyelids, as they languidly set some stitches in their needle-work, and talked—as sisters do talk who have been separated for years.

There was a big gap, in age, between the two, for Mary had been thirteen when Mamie

was born; but when the latter grew up, the difference between them seemed to vanish, and it had been a terrible wrench to Mary when the girl went out to India, to be married from a friend's house to a man the elder sister had never seen.

The pair had met at a country house, and the man had, shortly after, gone with his regiment to India, and from there had written to Mamie, entreating her to come out to him and be his wife; and, much to everybody's amazement, Mamie had picked up the handkerchief so graciously dropped to her—and gone.

Mary had packed some tears and thwarted hopes in with the girl's bridal-gown of white and silver, and she had trembled as she told Mamie how little she knew of this man to whom she was going so unhesitatingly, and Mamie had laughed, with the pure, utterly happy joy of a girl who is living in love's young dream, and without a tremor or a doubt, or a regret, she had gone, and the groom had met his bride, and the bride was a wife of some years' standing now.

And now the pair had come home, and

Captain Dewar had gone first to his own people in Scotland, and Mamie had come straight to Pigeonwick, and they had talked, these sisters, of everything upon earth save their own hearts.

Mamie had been a beauty, which Mary never was, and she had had the brightest smile and the merriest laugh that ever girl had, and she was as merry and bright now as she had been then, or at least so said the Fletchers, assuring each other, acrimoniously, that *she* had drawn a prize in the matrimonial lottery, anyway.

But Mary looked deeper, and she found the heart and soul of the smile gone, and the merriment might pass muster with the world, but it rang untrue in the ears that so jealously held the memory of a spontaneous happiness in every ripple of the girl's young voice.

And Mamie's blue eyes were as exquisite as ever, only they had a different look in them, as if they had gazed out for a long while on something that hurt them, and the hurt had been gotten over, but the look remained.

And Mary said to herself that something had caused her to suffer exceedingly, so much that she would never be able to suffer very much again ; and having made a compromise with life (as most of us do), had taken counsel with a brave heart, and resolved that, if she wore it on her sleeve, it should look as gay as the best.

Mamie could enjoy a joke as well as ever. She was, indeed, much given to raising her own and her neighbours' spirits, wheresoever she might find herself, by amusing stories, and an exercise of that sense of humour which is so rare in a woman, and she got immense satisfaction out of the peculiarities of the Fletchers, and even occasionally made sad-eyed Mary enjoy them too.

But on this especial afternoon, Mamie was barren of jokes, and Mary felt the oppression of life weighing her down heavily, like clods on a half-dead man's breast.

The peace and loveliness of the garden positively sickened her, and the buzzing of the droning flies irritated her nerves ; she actually thought, with keen longing, of the

hot and dusty Park, where folks congregated, and a hum of talk filled the air.

"It's *very* good of you, Mamie, to bury yourself down here," she burst out suddenly, "just to be with me—when so much is going on in Town. And of course, you expected to find me at Harley Street, when you came home."

"Yes," said Mamie, "I did. But it was *you* I came to see, not your house."

She dropped her work, got out of her long chair as only a graceful young woman could, and knelt down beside her sister.

"Mary," she said, "dear old girl,"—and laid her cheek to the older and paler one—"can't you talk about it, even to me? It would do you good—and if you could cry, it would be better still."

Her arm was round Mary's neck now, and, for awhile, they held each other tightly, and neither spoke.

"It's no good, Mamie," she said at last, "nothing can alter it . . . and I suppose men are *so* . . . but I am glad Dolly died. It would drive me mad to think she might ever live to go through what I have done."

"Amen," said Mamie.

Mary put her sister a little away, and looked in her face.

"Do *you* say that?" she said, "and you are not five-and-twenty yet! Oh! it is horrible! And you loved him so, child—*how* you loved him!"

"Yes," said Mamie, slowly, "I *did* love him, with the pure, true love of a girl. It's dead now, Mary—he killed it, utterly, and it will never come back, never, never."

"What did he do?" said Mary, almost in a whisper. "Was it—was it like John?"

Mamie shook her head.

"They were little things," she said, "but little things break a woman's heart, just as little worries, household worries, age a woman before her time, and make her old, while the man beside her keeps young. And if men only knew how, by trifles, they write their characters across our lives, and how our respect or contempt for them is formed by the merest nothings, they would be more careful how they behave . . . but they never know. And you and I get on far better now than when we were first married—capi-

tally, in fact—and people hold us up to admiration as a pattern pair.”

“And he doesn’t know?” said Mary, almost piteously.

“No—and, please God, never shall. If he holds the casket, what matter if the jewel be gone? He will never look—and he will never know.”

“But you are so pretty, child, and so young,” said Mary, sadly, “there will be somebody else.”

“Yes. He has come and gone,” said the girl, quietly, “long after I had—been disillusioned. After all, you have only to stand firm, to hold on by your eyelids, and strength will come, somehow, to enable you to hold on after. And if one is only starved long enough, one can do very well without love, and one does not cry out and hunger after it as daily bread.”

Mary pressed the bright head down on her breast with a sudden sob of pain.

“It is too cruel,” she said, “that you should be made to suffer so—that we must *all* suffer so.”

“Not all,” said Mamie, “it is only the

women who are capable of loving very passionately and purely, who suffer when they marry men who never attempt to understand them, supposing that when a woman's love is gained *once*, it is gained forever. There's something pathetic about it, too," she went on, after a pause, "that men should be at once so brutal and so trusting. But I've come to the conclusion, Mary, that no woman ever understands a man properly, and no man a woman, or if he does, Providence intended *him* for a woman—and spoiled him in the making."

"Mamie," said her sister, pulling the girl back and looking at her with horror-stricken eyes. "It's all so strange, so new to me to hear any one talk so—most of all you. It seems yesterday you were a child, and you know so much more than I do, and you think so badly of men, and yet you tolerate them . . . and I could not tolerate John."

"I can't understand it—about John," said Mamie, shaking her head, "he was so devoted to you, and he never seemed to know there was another woman in the world. What

possible attraction could *she* have had for him, or he for her? ”

“ He is a man,” said Mary, bitterly, “ and all is fish that comes to Lady Blanche’s net. But O! my dear, you say Captain Dewar disillusioned you, and John never did me, it was I who disillusioned *him*—I wore him out bit by bit with my horrid temper—or he never would have behaved as he did.”

“ Stuff,” said Mamie, “ you were never bad tempered—he began it, I know. How *did* it begin? ”

“ He used to hide things from me,” said Mary, hanging her head, “ letters and things, and he never told me where he was going, or else he made up something palpably untrue, and one day I found him at Lady Blanche’s, and then I knew.”

“ She wanted something of him,” said Mamie, “ and she flattered him,” she added with curling lip, “ and flattery will undo the the best man living. Fool him to the top of his bent, and he thinks you are an angel; tell him some home-truths, make fun of some personal peculiarity, and you are a devil. A

woman who has studied flattery as a fine art rules the world."

"I never flattered John," said Mary, with gentle dignity; "even if I had tried, I should not have known how. Do you flatter Captain Dewar?"

"I manage him," said Mamie, with a trace of hardness in her voice. "When one cannot have the real thing, it is necessary to put up with an imitation of it, unless you want to be jeered at by the world. He will call me by more superlatives in one day, Mary, than John ever called you in a month, yet John *loved* you, Mary—loves you still, I'll swear—and Jem never did more than fancy me."

"What is it to *fancy*?" said Mary, absently, her heart secretly throbbing with joy at Mamie's words.

"A *fancy*, Mary, is a thing for which there is one cure that has never been known to fail," said Mamie, springing up, "and that is—marriage."

CHAPTER XII.

THE long, unlovely platform of Euston was alive with passengers taking their seats in the night mail for the North, taking them too, with a glad, eager hurry that told with what rejoicing men and woman were fleeing away on this broiling 10th of August to the purity and coolness of the moors.

Towards the middle of the train, a Pullman's car, labelled "Engaged," was the centre of much fuss and commotion, from the number of servants going in and out, while in their midst half-a-dozen men and women were making an amount of noise that only really smart people dare to indulge in in public.

The party was Lady Blanche Jessup's, or rather a considerable number of the party were going on to Perthshire with her, and among these persons was Mary's husband Colonel Anderson.

She was laughing unstintedly at some remark made by one of her companions when her glance fell upon John, when she immediately averted it, and said something in a low tone to a man near her, at which he exploded into violent mirth.

Probably the object of it neither saw nor heard either, as he made his way to the book-stall, meaning to hunt for something solid to read on his long journey North.

There were five minutes yet before the train started, and he absently handled and looked at some of the literature that was laid out in rows, never noticing a lady, who also was examining the spread-out wares without much display of interest or as if she meant to buy.

She was rather slight in figure and very pretty, her hair curled charmingly over her forehead, and she was dressed to perfection in black, with a great cluster of crimson roses in the bosom of her frock.

She was evidently waiting for some one, and turned round every half-minute to look about, and so pre-occupied was she that the absent-minded man beside her actually saw

her first, drawing back as he did so with a low cry, that she did not hear.

Almost at the same moment, a tall, good-looking man, evidently in the service, and just what Mary had admired when she married her untidy husband, joined her, exclaiming :

“Why, dear, I was afraid I should miss you! How long have you been here?”

“O! only a few minutes, Jem. What time does our train start?”

“In twenty minutes—after this long-barrelled train has been got safely off. Dear me, Mary, how sweetly pretty you do look to-night!”

Mary laughed.

“You see what I have done!” said Mary, laughing as merrily as a child. “You know you were always at me about it, and really I was tired of being a dowdy, and wanted a change!”

What was that curious sound beside her?

Mary turned suddenly, and saw her husband, John Anderson.

For a moment she stood petrified, looking at the worn, haggard face, and John had always carried fine flags of health in his cheeks,

thus encouraging her to cruelty. It is your man with a skin like a nicely boiled parsnip who makes you think twice before putting upon him more than providence evidently intended him to bear.

"John," said the poor woman, "your collar is unfastened, and no one has brushed your coat to-day. Why don't they take better care of you at home?"

But John's eyes were fixed on the fringe that partly hid Mary's white forehead, and the consciousness of that thoroughly presentable man in the background goaded him to fury.

"Quite good enough for a man of my age, ma'am," he said grimly. "At our time of life there's no need to try and bedizen ourselves."

And with all the insane jealousy of a man who has never been jealous before, he glared at the unknown, as if he longed to spring at his throat.!

But Mary looked at him pitifully, seeing new lines and hollows where none had been a few short months ago, and then someone suddenly shouted out his name, and, lifting

his hat, he moved without another word towards the train.

A woman's high shrill voice rose above all the din, and was easily identified by Mary.

"That is Lady Blanche Jessup's voice," she said suddenly. "She is going North, and my husband is going with her."

She turned her back on the train, and moved quickly away, followed by "Jem," just as Tom rushing up from an opposite direction, cannoned violently against a tall man who turning angrily, saw that it was his own son.

"*Dad!*" cried Tom, out of breath and astonished for the moment, then his face changed, and his hand fell to his side.

"Tom!" said John Anderson.

"I've been to see you, father," said the young man, "but you were never to be found at home, and I was never allowed farther than the doorstep, as if I were a thief. And I've written to you, and you've never answered me——"

"I never got your letters, Tom," said his father. "If you directed them to Harley Street, I never go there now."

Tom's eyes flashed.

“ I can’t talk to you here, sir,” he said, “ can’t we get into some quiet place ? ”

“ I am going by that train,” said John, pointing to the train, which wanted now only one minute of departure, “ with—with Lady Blanche’s party. Tom,” he added, with a hurried catch in his breath, “ look after your mother, she has some man capering about with her. He calls her *dear*, and she calls him *Fem*. Yes, *Fem* ! I’ve never seen the fellow before in my life, and she’s so pretty, you know, Tom—and would you believe it? she wears a fringe—a *fringe*,” repeated poor John, his voice rising almost to a scream. “ It’s positively disgraceful, but I understand *now* why she talked about getting a divorce.”

For a moment Tom’s heart failed him ; so disordered, so old, so shabby did his father look, that a sickening doubt of his sanity crossed the poor fellow’s brain.

“ I say, are you coming, or are you *not* ? ” cried out someone, who seized John by the arm, and pushed him into the train just as it began to move.

Mechanically, Tom stepped along beside it, and was rewarded by seeing his father’s

head thrust out of the window, and hearing his anxious voice say:

“ Tom, keep an eye on that fellow ! What-ever you do, don’t leave your mother alone. That fringe——” but the train bore away the remainder of the speech.

CHAPTER XIII.

“Do not wear on your countenance offensive looks, which, though harmless, are unpleasant.”

THUCYDIDES.

FLETCHER was cleaning silver like a demon in a pantry whose open latticed window looked out on a garden from which all the flowers had vanished, while leaves, leaves, leaves! decorated it gorgeously and held full sway.

The air was at once as mild and fresh as a late spring morning. There was the same dewy grass, the same blue sky, occasionally veiled with snowy clouds, but the promise of the earth was over, and its fulfilment was now sinking gradually into the warm mother-breast whence it had originally sprung.

The pale yellow elm-leaves had begun to rustle one by one, like silk, to the ground, through the dry leaves of the oak a little wind went creeping with a moan and a rustle, scat-

tering them in a trembling shower, so loth were they to go, so unwilling to make room for the vigorous new generation already stirring within the heart of the giant whence they sprang !

“Of all the God-forsaken places on earth,” said Fletcher, in a voice of the intensest exacerbation, “give *me* a cottage in the country, five miles from a market town, in November. What does that garden say,” (he pointed a silver fork disgustfully at its lovely melancholy), “but ‘Fletcher, go and hang yourself,’? Why, I can’t even sleep at night for the screeching of them nightingales, as goes on yellin’ when the other birds has the decency to stop, and the sound of the milkman coming down the street with his Mok ! Mok ! ’ud be downright music to my ears, let alone the cats’-meat-man, who’d make me feel myself again. And if it weren’t for that poor innocent up in Town, wandering about all alone by himself, and getting into goodness knows what scrapes, now as them whose duty it is to look after him has deserted him, I’d have done it long ago, Martha—hanged if I wouldn’t !”

“Hanged if you did, you mean,” said Martha, nursing her arms as usual, and wearing a pink cotton frock also as usual. “And pray what good would that do anybody?”

“You could marry again,” snarled Fletcher, who, what with disgust at his surroundings and anxiety for his master, was like a bear with a sore head.

“Not I,” said Martha, comfortably, “once bit, twice shy. Independence for me, if I’m left a widow. If I were a man,” continued Martha, meditatively, “you wouldn’t catch me marrying—not much!”

“No more ’ud I, if I had my time over again,” said Fletcher. “Lord! to think how one act of folly can undo a lifetime!”

“It oughtn’t to,” said Mary, equably. “What a pity one can’t divorce a man for—what’s the word—incom—incomp——”

“Uncomfortability of temper, I suppose you mean,” said Fletcher, loftily, “but they *do* in America, and I’ve heard as how a lady once danced in a set of Lancers where every Jack man of ’em was a divorced husband, except the eighth, and she was thinking about divorcing *him*.”

"Some people have such luck!" said Mary, thoughtfully; "now she must have been a judge of husbands, and likely to know when she got a good one. How can a poor woman be a judge, that's never had but *one*? And I'm sure if anybody ought to be able to get a divorce, it's missus."

Fletcher snorted but made no reply.

"What has *she* done, I should like to know, to be sent down here, for all the world like as if she was put in the corner for disgrace, and left alone week after week, month after month, till everybody stares at her, and thinks she must be as bad as can be? If she *was* bad, she'd have got a husband to dance after her, morning, noon, and night! A man likes to see his wife admired—he don't want what nobody else wants! Seems to me as he always likes best the woman who gives him a lot of trouble—she fills his hands, and prevents him from getting into mischief himself—but missus was always miles too good to do that, so what does master do, but go gallivanting himself."

"It's false!" cried Fletcher at the top of his voice, "as false a word as a woman ever

spoke! Master was druv out of his own house by aggerawation, and ain't he to speak to another human bein' for the rest of his life?"

"Human beings, by all means," said Mary in her cool voice, "but not females—not Lady Blanches. A locust, *I* call her, for it's my belief she's been eating up master's substance till he's as bare as a gleaned field."

Fletcher paused in his work to turn a penetrative eye on his better-half.

"I don't think you're so far out, Martha," he said in a tone of wondrous mildness, "that's her character—to get the last shilling she can out of a man, and then chuck him. And it's my belief she's chucked master."

"What have you heard?" said Martha quickly.

But Fletcher was already repenting him of his burst of confidence, and had withdrawn into the silence in which he was able to sit as in a tower, out of reach of Martha's tongue.

"Missus has fretted worse than ever since that night in August when she saw him," went on Martha, showing no sign of rebuff,

“his collar all open,”—Fletcher writhed as if undergoing the most exquisite torture—“his trousers looking as if he had slept in ’em,”—Fletcher’s long body doubled itself up in agony—“his hat not brushed”—(Fletcher groaned—for what does it matter about the inside of your head, that nobody sees, so long as the outside covering shines in the eyes of all beholders?)—“and his poor moustachios, one up and one down, like a man who’s just got out of the clutches of a virago!”

“Just getting *into* the clutches of one, you mean,” said Martha, “I wonder if he’s there now?”

“He might have took me,” said Fletcher in an aggrieved voice, “I’m partial to Scotland, it’s a beautiful place. Some parts of it is more *mountainious* than others.”

Martha laughed after her aggravating fashion. She was far better educated than Fletcher, and he often wondered what she found to laugh at, *now*. It always made him angry, because he felt sure that somehow—he didn’t quite know how—she had got the pull over him, but wouldn’t explain.

“And if master is there now,” he went on loftily, “it serves missus right. What call had she got to leave him? Didn’t she and me together take care of him all his life, and how can she expect him to walk alone? ’Course he’s tumbled into a ditch! But he’s that obstinate he’ll never send for neither of us to dig him out, for he’s as proud as proud. Your folks as never pretend to any pride always is, and them as thinks he’s weak and easy to lead is very much mistaken. He ain’t one to cry out when he’s hurt, he’d just bleed quietly inside, and nobody ’ud be the wiser. And what you women calls obstinacy,” went on Fletcher, feeling that he had got an idea, and wishing greatly to rise to the dignity of it, “*we* calls strength—and strength it is. We lets you dance about a bit, and show off your tempers and airs, and think yourselves the boss, but all the time we can crush you with a touch, so,” and he majestically brought his hand down on the handle of a silver cake-basket, that obediently sank at his spiriting. “And we are patient—patient as we are strong, because if we *did* arise in our might, where”—Fletcher

paused in the very height of his peroration—"where, I ask, *are* you?"

Martha began to laugh, went on laughing, and finally ran out of the room with whole fountains of laughter bubbling up in her still. She must tell her mistress this, and it would make her laugh too, but the sudden appearance of Tom, hatted and coated, in the hall, looking pale and worried, sobered her completely.

"Where is Fletcher?" he said.

"In the pantry, Mr. Tom."

And Tom, saying "Don't tell my mother I am here!" strode off at express speed.

Fletcher had his back turned to the door, and his squashed attitude betrayed to Tom's experienced eye that a matrimonial duel had just taken place, and Fletcher, thinking the enemy had returned, did not look round.

"Here, I say," said Tom, "there's something wrong with the poor governor, and we've got to find out what it is."

Fletcher turned round, very pale, but braced up to hear the worst and do his level best.

"Did you know the house in Harley

Street was let—has been let for months?” said Tom sharply.

“No, Mister Tom. Master forbid me to go nigh the place, and Cook never wrote once—never answered my wife nor me either, when we wrote to her, and we thought she was forbidden. But is that all—only the house let?” he added anxiously, “it was a big house for master to live in all alone.”

“It’s not all,” said Tom, lowering his voice. “You know I called more than once and never got any farther than the doorstep, but to-day I was *determined* to go in, and I pushed past the servant, a stranger, and walked straight into the dining-room. There was not a stick nor stone of our things in it! ‘I expected to find my father here,’ I said—‘Colonel Anderson—has he been gone long?’

“The girl said the family came in in September, but the house had been empty and unfurnished for months before that, as her mistress had looked over it as early as June. *June!* what has become of everything—and what has become of your master since June?’

“Missus saw him in August, so did you,” said Fletcher trembling. “How has he been living all this time, poor, poor soul, with nobody to vally him, or do nothing?”

“I have been to his club,” said Tom, knitting-his brows; “he has not been there since May. I have seen Mr. Goldsworthy, but he was very reticent: said my father might have lost money, but not through him; and that I had his warm congratulations on my mother’s money being tied up on herself and me, and therefore safe. And now,” added Tom, “how are we to find him? He seems to have disappeared and left no trace, or he is wilfully hiding from us.”

“Ask Lady Blanche,” suggested Fletcher, who had a large smudge of plate powder across his nose, to save his countenance from unadulterated tragedy.

Tom blushed,

“I suppose I must,” he said savagely, “but she is not likely to trouble herself much about him now he is ruined. For he *is* ruined, Fletcher. I feel sure of it, and I believe it was because of that, and because he hadn’t the courage to tell her, that he consented to

he—" Tom paused for a word—" division of households, and that he meant to starve up in Town, while we were comfortably provided for down here."

" Very likely," said Fletcher, with tears in his eyes, " his was always the sweetest, most unselfish nature in the world, and he'd prefer to be blamed for things he hadn't done, rather than say anything unkind to anybody, or stand up for himself. And now, master Tom what are you going to do? "

" I'm going," said Tom, his flexible young lips straightening into a hard line, " back to Town to find Lady Blanche——"

" She's sure to be in Scotland at this time of year," interpolated Fletcher.

" ——if she is not in Town, I shall go over to Scotland," said Tom, " and if she can't or won't tell me anything, I shall go to Scotland Yard."

" Take me with you, Master Tom," said Fletcher imploringly.

" No, I may want you later. Mind, not a word to my mother about my being here. I thought I heard that beast Dewar's voice in the drawing-room? "

"Yes, Master Tom, you did."

"Ugh! Well, I'm off. I'll let you know how things turn out."

"You'll write or wire me the moment you know anything?" said Fletcher, as imploringly as a distracted mother asking news of her child.

"I'll write. Keep up your pecker, Fletcher. If it's nothing worse than losing money we'll have him safe at home yet."

And ramming his hat on his head, Tom vanished by the back door.

* * * * *

"Martha," said Mary that evening as her woman brushed her hair, "you have been crying. What is the matter?" she asked, with some surprise, as she knew that never had that doughty and independent person been known to shed tears either before or after a matrimonial row.

But Martha went on crying, contorting her face hideously, and would neither explain nor be comforted.

"Is it anything to do with your master?" said Mary indifferently.

Yes, she could speak and feel quite indif-

ferently now, for the fires of suffering had burned themselves out, and in their grey ashes lay buried the love that John Anderson had so openly betrayed and shamed.

“ Oh no, ma’am, But he’s been more cross and snappish than usual for days, hardly touching his food, and railing at the country and the litter of leaves as if they were poison. He said yesterday he’d give half he was possessed of to hear a muffin bell again, or the milkman calling ‘ *Mok! Mok!* ’ down the area at Harley Street. But—but I never thought he’d run away like a housemaid that’s forged her own character ; but, O ! ma’am he’s done it.”

“ Run away ? ” said Mary, standing up in her astonishment.

“ Yes,” cried Martha, wringing her hands, “ run away from *me*, ma’am. To think that after all these years I should be disgraced by having a man run away from me.”

Mary’s lips curved between scorn and pity as she said :

“ What makes you think he has run away ? ”

“ He went out directly he’d cleared away dinner, and at supper Cook gave me this,”

said Martha, producing a scrap of paper with one hand, and drying her eyes with the other.

Mary read it gravely. Perhaps she was thinking of another letter that had been addressed to herself.

“ Martha,” it said, “ I’m going away. Don’t you trubble to follow, becorse you woant find me. Make my respecs to missus, and I hope as how she’ll forgive me, but I’m following the parth of dooty.

“ TIMOTHY FLETCHER.”

“ And now, *please*, ma’am, could you manage with Polly and the cook for a few days, while I go and look for him? ”

CHAPTER XIV.

“When all the world should frown on me
I then should find a trusty friend.”

MR. and Mrs. Fletcher were people of great distinction in their line, and the few friends that they had made in Town (both being country folks) occupied a high position in the households they had condescended to enter.

These ladies and gentlemen were in the habit of exchanging visits and hospitalities with much state and formality at occasional intervals, observing a nicety in their conversation, and a delicacy in their choice of words that more than compensated for the vagaries of the letter H, as it attached itself to words that would have been considerably better without it.

Always careful to keep up appearances, Martha never paid visits without Fletcher, and once arrived in Town she was at her wits' end how to make enquiries as to his

whereabouts without revealing the fact that she was a forsaken spouse, engaged in the ignominious task of trying to catch a runaway and bring him home.

For that he had run away from her and the dulness at Pigeonwick, and his own heart-ache about his master, at last, Martha had no manner of doubt, and a strange doggedness that had lately shewed in him flashed upon her now as a quiet, steady determination to go to the devil in his own way, and in his own way, time, unhindered by her influence or any attempts of hers to stop him.

His master had been his idol, his one care on earth, and he had missed him and fretted after him like a mother after her babe, and with his object in life gone, he had become first hard, then desperate, and now he did not value his own life and character at two pins.

Then indeed Martha's heart awoke, and howled for her Fletcher, and something better still awoke also, the determination to save him from himself, whether he would or no, a determination that animating the breasts of all

husbands and wives would save three parts of the piteous tragedies on earth.

So, when she had established herself in a modest lodging, Martha cast about in her mind how to begin.

Fletcher was not a man of low haunts, and she knew of none in which to look for him, and though it was scarcely likely that, wishing to elude her, he would look up their joint friends, it was possible that he might have been seen about in Town by one of them, so with the utmost care Martha dressed herself out for the round of visits she intended to make.

A good many families were still out of Town, but November had also brought a great many home—home to the darkness, and the fogs and the universal balefulness of life under impossible conditions of health, all cheerfully endured for the gratification of that gregarious instinct which crowds mortals together in breathless masses, and makes us shun the moor and the country-side they must tread alone.

But the immediate enquiry for “Mr. Fletcher” on Martha’s appearance, immedi-

ately convinced her that he was not "in evidence" anywhere, but that, as she expected, he "lay low," and it would be a clever Br'er Rabbit indeed who unearthed him.

Martha's excuse for his non-appearance was simple enough. He was in the country, a fact that excited no comment in the minds of these lords and ladies of plush and satin, who would have liked the Fletchers better had they not been so sparing in their allusions to "our people."

To turn master and mistress inside out, their habits, income, appearance, faults of manner and character, to ruthlessly hold all these up to the light, as a careful housewife examines the warp and woof of the stuff she is buying, is a labour of love to our superiors in the kitchen, and the favourite means of occupying the elegant leisure with which they are so amply blessed.

But the Fletchers had always said little, and that the very best of the Andersons, though possibly they enjoyed the racy stories at the expense of the first-class misdemeanants upstairs as well as anybody, and occasionally felt that while praise is the extinguisher of wit,

and the most monotonous psalm in the world, abuse wears a thousand agreeable charms of variety, and is the discoverer of more brilliancy in us than we ever supposed ourselves to possess.

So when Martha had quietly exhausted her visiting-list without results, she had only herself to fall back upon, and very dull she found it, with her occupation gone—the occupation of sharpening her wits and tongue at Fletcher's expense, her duties to Mrs. Anderson being a matter of quite secondary consideration. She missed those duties now, and had that miserable feeling of idleness that in one accustomed to work is the most demoralizing and hopeless of sensations, and something very like despair began to settle on Martha's soul as the days went by, and still she had not obtained the smallest clue to her husband's whereabouts.

She did not write to her mistress, she preferred rather to be thought neglectful and ungrateful than that she should have to confess how completely Fletcher had given her the slip.

That he was not with his master at Harley

Street, she had very quickly found out, for the whole look of the house, the people and children who went in and out, shewed plainly enough that he had let the place, let it furnished, as she supposed, as it all looked much as usual.

But one day as she sat in her little room, idle, with her stout heart beginning to waver in her breast, the thought struck her that Fletcher might not be in London at all, but in Scotland with his master, or gone abroad with some new master, instead of starting at full gallop for perdition.

And then she remembered how he had looked latterly, and of one or two things he had let drop, and she knew the heart of the man was too heavy and broken within him to accept service under a new master, and she never forgot that, steady as he was, he came from a family of ne'er-do-weels, who drank hard, lived hard, and usually died in most disgraceful fashion.

She had known all this, yet she had never spared him the lash of her tongue all the same; perhaps if she had been better to him he would not have fretted after his gentle

master so much, or at any rate would have turned to her for comfort ; and sorrowfully as her mistress had confessed her faults of temper to her own heart, this stubborn woman began to confess hers, and in long hours of doubt and wretchedness formed the doughty resolve that if ever they came together again she would be a perfect Griselda—not that she had ever heard of Griselda—and being quite unaware that Grizels are born, not made, for nature has decreed that a woman can never be anything but herself.

Martha could scarcely eat, barely sleep, and keep still not at all, so in her decent black, with a thick veil tied over her comely face, she tramped the streets, north, south, east and west, and late one night as she came down the Commercial Road, Heaven, or good luck, or Kismet, came to her aid, and tumbling out of a public-house Fletcher almost fell into her arms.

With a sob, she caught him, and held him fast.

“ Tim ! ” she said, “ Tim ! I’ve found you ! I’ve found you ! ” and kissed him like one gone mad for joy.

He was in rags, his face dirty, his stubbly beard and hair unkempt, but he was the most delightful sight to her eyes at that moment that the whole beautiful earth could have afforded.

“Martha!” he said, in amazement.

“You’ve taken to drink,” she said, in his ears, “I feared it—it’s in the blood—and you so troubled about master, and worried by my horrid temper and all—it’s done for you, my poor Tim—but only just for the time being, and you’ll pull round again. If you’ve spent all your money, *I’ve* got some—and now you’ll come along home with me, Tim,” and she drew the ragged, soiled arm through her own, and led him tenderly away.

But Tim was not drunk, though he let her think so, confirming the idea as he actually stooped down and kissed her of his own accord.

CHAPTER XV.

“ God looks to pure hands, not full ones,”

SYRACUSE.

CAPTAIN DEWAR had gone to Monte Carlo, Mamie had departed to friends in Devon, the Fletchers had vanished into space, and Mary said to herself that it was a general stampede, as she walked through the drifting leaves, in the calm November air, noting the griping touch of the Frost King's fingers on autumn's lingering treasures.

Mamie had begged Mary to go with her; these friends of one were friends of both sisters, but she would not.

“ Let every tub stand on its own bottom,” she had said laughing. “ Next year, perhaps, I shall make new plans—but I don't know. I can't go out of England till Tom has left Oxford, and I will not allow him to break up his career because I cannot support loneliness, and my own thoughts.”

And Mamie had sighed, thinking that sometimes loneliness was better than an enforced companionship with a tailor's-dummy of a man, in the whole of whose well-proportioned body was a mind of such pigmy proportions that it could scarcely be dignified with the name of a mind at all.

But a well-groomed appearance and a caressing manner to every woman, including his wife, will carry a man triumphantly over shoals and quicksands into which the sincerely honest man sinks and is lost; so Captain Dewar held his head up with the best, while John Anderson, his noble nature to all appearance irremediably wrecked, had, in the significant language of the world, accomplished that living death in life known as "going under."

And to-day Mary's heart, at first so stagnant and then vaguely soothed by the petting and cheerful society of her sister, was feverishly wakening again to torment, and an omen of evil kept step with her as she walked affecting her with even a physical sense of coming misfortune.

She tried to thrust it from her, asking what

worse could befall her than had befallen already?

Tom was safe, she had just heard from him, and she had no one to care about but Tom now.

Suddenly she stood still in the middle of the lane, its steep banks thickly clothed with fern, tufted with gorse, and capped with rich winter-berried thorn that seemed to mock a bush of holly, its fruit just changing from green to red, and lacking the vivid, audacious colouring of its neighbour.

Holly . . . and in six weeks it would be Christmas Day . . . the first Christmas Day for twenty years that she had not spent beside *him*.

“Peace on earth, goodwill towards men” . . . the words rang mournfully and appealingly in her ears. What had she done? oh! what had she done?

Had she tried, with all her heart, soul and strength, to rescue her husband—had she not suffered temper, and pride, and the unforgiveable slight to petty miserable *self*, to drag her from the path of duty, and leave him in the slough of his despair—alone?

She had been ashamed of him—yes, ashamed. At Euston, it had seemed a slur on her taste that she could ever have loved, and married, and fretted herself to fiddle-string over such an unkempt, un-self-respecting creature!

She had been ashamed to say to Captain Dewar, “That is my husband”; but to-day, alone, face to face with the conscience that she had deliberately thrust into the background all these months, she knew herself for a woman who had signally failed in her duty, and who had no right on her knees, or in a church, or anywhere with those noble souls, who forgave others their trespasses, even as they prayed God to be themselves forgiven.

She stood still in the midst of a pearly mist that closed round her suddenly like a shroud, with a vivid sense of awful isolation, much as though she had been buried alive, and wakened to find herself alone, with the sound of once loved footsteps and voices passing over her head. . . .

“O! my dear,” she said, below her breath, “for one touch of your hand or mouth, one moment with my arms round your neck

. . . and you might be as shabby, and old, and miserable as you liked, I should love you, love you, *love* you, and in your heart you have loved me best, all along."

For a moment the fog lifted, and showed a timid hare skirting the hedgerow, hurrying round to her family, no doubt, as fast as she could go.

"That was what Mamie meant," she went on, with a sudden change of thought, "when she said that some men rubbed up their farthings to look like gold, and offered them to a woman, and others kept their pure gold so dull that it might pass for copper, but a wife got to know the real value of what a man gave her in time, she meant that the pure gold, all the gold of his life, was mine, and the glittering copper hers. And the outside of a man, his very name even, does not matter—it is the *heart*. That is the man. And no matter what my poor fellow may have done, what follies and errors he may have fallen into, he is too good in the main to have strayed far from the right path, and I am going to look for you, John, to look for you, and find you."

She walked buoyantly on, unchilled by the clinging mist, so warm was the heart-fire within her, and Mary could walk quickly enough now, for restless days and sleepless nights had given back to her the figure of a girl, and into her face had come a new and spiritualised beauty that made her younger by ten years.

“I think I can understand it all now,” she said to herself, “what a woman may be driven to . . . after all, the weakest man is stronger than the strongest woman—he is self-sufficient, he has no ill-health, no nerves (anybody could tell by the way women are made that Providence isn’t female!), while *she*, without him she is nothing. She has no one to think of, no one to provide for—and men are nothing but grown-up children, after all!”

She went into the pretty, low house—in summer a bower of trellis-work and roses—with a light step, and found the rose-shaded lamps inviting and cheerful after the mist and loneliness without.

A long figure rose from a lounging chair,

as she came in, and seized her in its arms—it was Tom.

But even while he kissed her, she pushed him back with both hands, and looked in his face.

“Your father?” she said, “you have brought me bad news?”

The revulsion of feeling was too great, after the resolve of the past hour, and she would have fallen if he had not caught her.

But she did not faint, strong-hearted women never do; they only suffer agonies that the weak mercifully escape by unconsciousness, and in a few seconds she said:

“Tell me.”

“There is not much to tell, mother darling,” said Tom pitifully, his own face telling far more than he knew; “only we can’t find father, and we are afraid——”

“That he is dead,” said Mary quietly, “and, if so, I killed him.”

“I don’t believe he is dead for a moment,” said Tom energetically; “but we are afraid that he is living somewhere on very narrow means.”

“Starving, you mean,” said Mary, throwing

her costly cloak from her as if it burnt her.

"We hope not," said Tom, gravely, "but we have found out, Fletcher and I, and Mr. Goldsworthy has helped us a little, that at the time you and he separated, he was an entirely ruined man. All his private fortune was gone, and after you left, everything was sold at Harley Street, including the lease, and the money for *that* vanished likewise."

"But he had his half-pay!" cried Mary, whose mind was recoiling at the modest luxury in which she had lived during the last six months.

"That is gone too, or rather, he does not receive it. He has assigned it to his creditors."

"What creditors?" said Mary. "Do you mean Lady Blanche's creditors?"

"No—his own. He seems to have speculated ruinously under Lady Blanche's auspices, but curiously enough, only *he* was ruined, not her exceedingly smart ladyship."

"John. . . . John" . . . said the poor woman, a moan breaking from the very

depths of her heart, "where are you? Tom, Tom, we must go at once and find him!"

"Fletcher and I have been looking for weeks," said Tom gravely. "We have communicated with the police, we have been to Scotland Yard, and everything short of advertising him has been done. He would never forgive us for doing that, if—if—" Tom hesitated, "he is alive."

"Oh, my God!" cried Mary, like a wild thing. "It is all my doing. Mine—mine! He was ruined, and I behaved like a brute to him, and he thought I knew it, and that was why I left him!"

"I am afraid that was so," said Tom, sadly. "Mr. Goldsworthy dropped a word or two to that effect, and you know how proud the poor old Dad was—he could never have borne to live upon a woman."

"Only that woman was his wife," said Mary, in agony. "I begin to understand now—and his letter. O! blind, blind!"

She threw herself face downwards on the couch, trembling as if with ague, and Tom tried in vain to soothe her.

“Homeless, hungry, alone!” she said
“while I——”

“Mother,” said Tom, almost sternly, “you were not to blame. He did not tell you, and how could you know? And his position with regard to Lady Blanche was equivocal enough to make any wife angry. *Beast!*” he ejaculated with extraordinary vigour.

“Who?” said Mary, lifting her pale face.

“*Her! She!* That woman. I went up to the North to see her. She denied herself to me. I insisted. She declined. I sat in the hall six hours, and wore her patience out at last. She told me insolently that she knew nothing whatever of my father’s movements.”

“Tom,” said Mary. “What had she got on?”

“I don’t know the colour, but next to nothing, as it was dinner-time.”

“And do you think her so handsome?”

“I think her a painted devil. Well, she swore she hadn’t seen or heard from father since August, when he spent a few days at the Castle. She scarcely hid her scorn of him as a broken-down gentleman, who had bored her to extinction, and said insolently

that father had been impertinent enough to associate her with his separation from his wife, and she had never been mixed up in affairs of that kind, and did not mean to be now."

"So his cosy corner was made cold to him," said Mary, almost unconsciously.

"I told her straight that she and her cursed speculations had been the ruin of him," went on Tom, "and, that though I had always heard her spoken of as the 'decoy duck' I never knew how thoroughly applicable the term was to her, till I saw her. And I told her that the woman who went into the streets for a living was worth fifty such as she, who ruined and despoiled honest English gentlemen to pay for their luxuries and to buy jewels to hide their brazen nakedness. And then I walked out."

"Tom! *Tom!*"

"And since then—but I have told you the rest."

"I am coming with you, Tom," said Mary, getting up and reaching for her cloak. "Do you think I can eat, sleep, and drink here while——"

"What can you do, mother?" interrupted

Tom sadly. "You can't dress yourself in rags and exploit the East End, as Fletcher is doing now."

"The East End. That awful place you call Whitechapel?" whispered Mary, in horror-struck accents.

"Yes - Fletcher thinks he's got a clue, and he's following it up like a bull-dog. And Martha's helping him!" he added, with a rueful attempt at a laugh.

"A clue?" said Mary, catching her breath, "and when will you know if it's a true one—to-night?"

"I hope so—but I doubt it."

Mary's face was turned towards the window, the blackness of which reflected the low couches, the flowers and the pictures in the room, reflected also Tom's figure and hers, as they stood together.

As she looked, something seemed to move between them, and she gripped Tom's arm, pointing with her other to the window.

"There's someone outside," she said, in a voice entirely unlike her own, and in a second had dashed forward, and was tearing at the wood and glass to get it open.

“ John ! ” she said, springing out into the dark, after a dark something that eluded her.

“ *John !* ”

No man could have resisted such a cry, and the figure came back, a thing in rags, and stood before her, the veriest scarecrow that ever appeared in a lady's presence.

“ Ma'am ” it said, imploring. It was Fletcher.

Mary laughed, with a laughter more dreadful than any tears. She seized him by the arm and dragged him into the warm, fragrant room, and demanded of him his news.

“ He is alive, ma'am, ” said Fletcher, solemnly, “ and he is well. ”

“ Thank God ! Thank God ! ” and Mary's grasp relaxed, and she stood alone. “ Tell me quick. Where is he ? ”

Fletcher shook his head. He was like the wraith of his respectable self, and yet he held his head up, and was his very self still, in all but appearance.

“ That I have not found out yet, ma'am, ” he said, “ but I know the neighbourhood he is in, and expect to find the exact house to-night or to-morrow. ”

Mary uttered a low moan of intense disap

pointment, much as a starving creature may, to whose lips bread is approached only to be snatched away.

“ You followed up that clue we got yesterday? ” said Tom, swiftly.

“ Yes, Mister Tom. And last night, about seven o'clock, what seemed to be about his dinner-time, poor soul! I saw him outside a dried-fish shop, looking in, and considering what he'd buy, and at last he bought two bloaters for a penny—bloaters for *dinner*, Master Tom—*bloaters*! The woman treated him as if he was a prince, and wrapped them up very careful, and he put them in his pocket, and went on.”

“ Was he—was he wrapped up? ” said Mary, thinking of the sharp frost of these early November nights.

“ Not much,” said Fletcher, hesitatingly, “ but he was tidy, no rags, ma'am, and clean linen—you know he never forgot that if he did everything else, but his hat and boots was very shabby, and he walked a bit bowed like, as if he'd been sitting over his books a good while.”

“ Go on,” said Mary, almost fiercely.

“Presently he stopped at a book-shop—seems wonderful-like they should have book-shops in Whitechapel—and he stops, and he takes up first one, then another, lovingly, just as ladies takes up their favourite flowers, and he fidgets about a bit, and he feels in his pocket, and his face brightens up, and in he goes, and without any haggling, for he never could haggle, he buys a book for sixpence, and comes out with it, looking almost happy.”

O! that “almost!” Mary winced again.

“Come, hurry up,” said Tom impatiently.

“And then he goes on again, into worse and worse neighbourhoods, that I wouldn’t have dared to tread on my own account ’less I’d been in rags, and I see people nudging one another to look at him, for you don’t see many gentlemen in these parts. But he’d no watch—there was nothing to steal, and he’d got that look in his face that the smallest child ’ud trust, and I knew he was safe enough, so I just followed on, and it seemed to me he was just going to stop at the mouth of a low alley, when he turned sharp round, and saw me.” Fletcher drew a deep breath,

and an expression of acute pain crossed his face.

“Before I could so much as speak, he waved me off quite wild-like. If he wasn’t such an abstanious gentleman, you’d have thought he’d been drinking, and ‘Fletcher,’ he says, ‘I never sent for you—how dare you come spying after me?’”

“I begged and implored him to listen to me, but he didn’t seem to hear, only says, ‘Go home, and don’t let me catch you here again! What business have you in those rags? Remember I left your mistress in your care, and I expect to be obeyed.’ There was that flash in his eye, I daredn’t stand up against it, so I just turned and went away, and then I made some enquiries—they took me a long time—but I’m pretty well sure I’ve found out the court he’s in—Slum Court it’s called—and I’m going into every house in it, on one pretext or other, to-night. And now I must be going, as it’s getting late.”

Mary was calmer now, with a profound feeling that she might be happy perhaps, by-and-by.

“Tom,” she said, turning to him, “take

me up to Town at once somewhere that Fletcher can come to, and tell us if *he* is found to-night."

Tom looked at his watch.

"There is a train in three-quarters of an hour," he said. "Is there anyone to harness the pony to the carriage?"

"I will," said Fletcher, promptly, and was shortly recognized and welcomed by Mayfly, who like most animals was not to be confused in a personality by a mere change of clothes.

"You must eat something first, mother," said Tom, as they crossed the hall to the dining-room, where the table was already laid for dinner, delicately bright with its glass and silver, and the autumn leaves that made a crimson wreath round the candelabra with its white shades.

"I am not hungry," said Mary, looking straight before her, and seeing instead a bare board, with a crust and a bit of dried fish upon it. "I have eaten too much and too long. I have eaten right through the time that he has *starved*!"

She rang the bell and Polly came.

“ I am going to Town for a few days,” she said, “ put me up a hand-bag and a change of linen—quick.”

The pony carriage came round as if of its own accord just as the bag was ready. On going out, Mayfly was discovered in sole possession, and Polly stared as mother and son drove away.

But outside the gate, a scarecrow jumped up behind, and went all the way as far as the railway station, where it once more miraculously disappeared.

“ Fletcher,” said Mary, turning her head once, “ where is Martha ? ”

“ In Whitechapel, ma’am, in a decent lodging, and very comfortable she has made it. She sent you her duty, and was sorry to be away so long.”

Mary smiled into Tom’s face in the dark, and Tom grinned back.

CHAPTER XVI.

“If a man perfectly righteous should come upon earth, he would find so much opposition in the world that he would be imprisoned, scourged, and in fine crucified, by such who, though very wicked, would yet pass for righteous men.”

PLATO.

THE tallow candle wanted snuffing, and John Anderson stretched his hand out for the snuffers.

There were none, and he went on reading with difficulty, the light was so bad. But he persevered, perhaps because the page was so much pleasanter to look upon than the squalid room, with its dirty, unwashed floor, its bulging, discoloured walls, and a dismal ceiling that his head almost touched when he stood upright.

A pallet, on which the linen was clean, a tub, a portmanteau that had seen better days, a jug and a basin, a saucepan, frying-pan and sooty kettle, with the chair and rude table at which he sat, completed the furniture of the

room. This being almost at the top of the house, no blind was required, and indeed the blackness of the night made one, though through the obscured glass no diamond points of starlight could shine. It was close on midnight, but the miserable place was alive with shouts and voices, and heavy steps that stumbled and pounded on the crazy stairs. The only quiet spot in it was this little room upstairs, and John's privacy was not likely to be invaded, for, no matter what orgies or rows might be going forward, it was an understood thing that the "gentleman was not to be disturbed."

So that he had no occasion to lock his door, and when presently it opened, he did not look up, supposing it would close again when the intruder discovered his mistake.

But the steps came right up to the table where he sat, and a loving young voice cried. "*Dad!*" and then choked as the tall, bent figure sprang up, and the two stood face to face.

"Father," said Tom, all the colour in his handsome young face, and tears in his eyes. "Oh! father, how *could* you?"

For a moment John's heart leaped, and the warmth of that young blood coursed through his veins as they gripped hands, then he drew himself up, and said proudly :

"And why are you here, Tom?"

"*Why?*" said poor Tom. "Did you think that because you deserted us, we were going to desert you?"

"I never deserted your mother," he said, coldly and firmly. "She deserted me. When I had lost my fortune, when I stood most in need of love and sympathy—she left me. And I could not live on a woman—especially when she did not want me."

"But she did not know," cried Tom. "She never knew a word of your losing any money until to-day. She thought that——"

John made a gesture with his hand to command silence.

"I do not know what she thought, I only know what she did. And she had wounded me deeply, Tom, long before that, by her railing, her jealousy, her whole conduct, so utterly unlike anything I had ever known in her before."

"She was jealous, certainly, father," said Tom, colouring, "but——"

"I had given her no occasion," said his father sternly, and indeed the past six months had clearly soured the usually sweet, frank temper. "She might have trusted me, but she did not. She might have seen my trouble, but she would not. I may be blind, but I think I should have known if she had been going through such a mental crisis as I was going through then, and I think that I should have been—kinder."

"She has been broken-hearted, father," said Tom under his breath, but his father caught it.

"No," he said, suddenly and sharply, "the woman who coldly and deliberately proposed a separation, who with perfect *sang-froid* carried it out, and quietly removed herself, and home and income, from a ruined man, takes too much care of her own comfort to be a broken-hearted woman. I had ruined myself, and in a manner—by reflection—her, and she could not forgive me. She was tired of me. She had other views——"

"Views?" ejaculated Tom, staring at his

father by the dim, miserable light. "What *do* you mean?"

"She spoke of marrying again, regretting that she could not get a divorce, and actually asked me to strike her, that she might do so."

"She was very sorry afterwards, sir,"

"I didn't understand it then," said John, whose pale face seemed to have dwindled to a point, while his dull eyes had that peculiarly hollow look belonging to privation and misery; "but I did—after. Why, Tom, that man she was frisking with at Euston that night—I never saw the fellow before in my life—dressed up like a girl, and a *fringe*, Tom; just think of it, at her age, and with a grown-up son. I saw directly *that* was why she had talked about getting a divorce, and he called her *dear*. Oh! shameless!"

He glanced downwards at the open book as if to calm himself with its philosophy, then went on quickly:

"I was anxious about her—women are such weak creatures, and she had always been taken such care of—and if you'll believe me, one night in September I stole down to Pigeonwick, and I stood in her

garden like a thief, and looking like a beggar, and I heard them talking—your mother and that fellow—on the verandah. He said what a pity it was she hadn't a man who really loved her, to look after her and pet her, and she said in a hard voice, not like your mother's, that she wished she had, and he said sometimes people (meaning me) died, and then she could be happy. And then I came away, for I had heard quite enough."

"Mamie must have been upstairs," burst out Tom. "Why, Dad, don't you know who that fellow was? Mamie's husband, and mother's brother-in-law."

John Anderson's jaw dropped, he stood staring at Tom as at a total stranger.

"Mamie's husband!" he repeated. "Captain Dewar?"

"Of course. You never saw him, you know, as Aunt Mamie was married in India."

John mechanically sat down at the table, but after a moment his face grew stern again. His hurt at Mary's hand was too deep, it had bled inwardly too long, to be lightly healed, but it suddenly struck Tom as extraordinary how little stress his father laid on his ruin,

and his subsequent privations, so entirely was he engrossed with Mary and her conduct.

“Dad,” blurted out Tom, “how have you lived all these months?”

John passed his hand across his brow, as one who by an effort recalls distasteful things.

“There’s no excuse for me, Tom,” he said. “I had no business speculating, but I got entangled—entangled. I don’t know how it was, but some wonderful big thing in which Lady Blanche and her husband expected to make a fortune, and in which I took shares, went wrong, and I found myself liable for a sum that only the realization of all my property, and even assignment of my half-pay for some years, would meet. Poor woman—she meant well no doubt, and she was kind and sympathetic at first, but afterwards, when I went over to Scotland, she entirely changed, and was very rude to me, so I came away.”

“Beast!” said Tom, savagely; “but you haven’t told me, father, how you kept body and soul together.”

“Do you remember Cousin Tabitha, Tom, the poor little old governess who got past work, and to whom I made an allowance for

many years? Well, she came into a small fortune last spring, and wrote and told me. I wrote to her boldly, and asked her to send me £25 a year for 'a distressed relation.' She never guessed it was me, and sends it regularly. If she had failed, or died ——" he paused.

A slight sound at the door made them both glance at it, Tom apprehensively. Wider and wider it opened, and something sank down noiselessly across the threshold.

Tom did not stir, only looked at his father, who looked back with a terrible, wild question in his eyes, then John Anderson strode across the room and stooping to that unconscious figure, bore it swiftly back in his long arms.

How light it was, what a mere feather-weight, as he sat down in the crazy chair and looked at the face lying on his breast, deathly pale, with the dews of exhaustion pearling her brow.

She could not say one word for herself, and a true woman, however wronged, never has a word to say for herself, but John read the story that her face told, and his soul yearned over her, and all the past burned up like a

scroll, and he felt the richest, happiest man in the whole world to-night.

He smoothed the brown hair back from her face, uncut now, just as it used to be—the fringe, where was it?—and pressed his lips to her cheek, her tender mouth, her throat, calling her his little one, his Mary, never even seeing how Tom had slipped away, and they two were alone together.

Out of the darkness, and pain, and misery, she opened her blue eyes on his face, and reaching out a timid arm, stole it round his neck. She was *home* now, safe, too happy yet to dare look her joy full in the face, but it was there. O, yes, it was there, and God surely would not be so cruel as to snatch it from her again.

John, she said, when they had “kissed again with tears,” “why did you lock the dressing-room door that night when I was coming to ask you to make it up?”

“Were you coming?” said John, in a startled tone.

“Yes, I almost had my hand on the door when you suddenly turned the key.”

“I thought you had been asleep for hours,”

said John, "and that you had shut the door as a sign to me that no appeal would alter your determination to leave me. And I was angry, Mary, as well as deeply hurt, and I think you were angry too."

Mary hung her head, but happiness dimpled the corners of her lips, and laughed in her eyes.

"You used to say I was getting fat, John—it used to be the only fault you ever found in me, but I am not too fat now?"

John laughed, and made a real lover's speech, and when Mary had twisted his moustachios and kissed the top of his head just where the hair grew thin they looked as happy a pair as you could wish to see.

Then Mary, waking to the fact that the world was not contained in a sharp white face, lit by two kind eyes, looked round the room, shuddering.

"My poor boy," she said, and then shuddered again, took in every detail of the famine-haunted place, and burst out crying.

"And I have lain warm and soft," she sobbed, "in my little bright nest."

A discreet knock came at the door.

"Come in," said John, and Fletcher, clothed and in his right mind, stood in the aperture, while over his shoulder Martha's rosy, smiling countenance peeped.

"The cab is at the door, sir, and I will follow you with the luggage."

"Fletcher, you scoundrel," said John, "come here. So it was you tracked me out here, was it?" And John wrung his hand, while Martha made a bee-line for her mistress, and the two women wept and smiled together.

"Your hat, sir," said Fletcher, who had in some mysterious way brushed and made it respectable.

"My books!" said John Anderson, and Mary pinched his arm and laughed.

"I am afraid I have been a little extravagant," he said humbly, "but when it came to be a choice between a dinner and a book——"

"I say," said Tom, putting his head in at the door, "all Slum Court is waiting outside to see you off—Slum Court never goes to bed, I believe."

Mary beckoned to Tom, with a wistful feeling that he had been forgotten, left out in the

cold, and they hugged each other with silent warmth.

“My boy,” said John, putting his hand on Tom’s shoulder, but Tom knew well enough how it was Mary—Mary, who filled his father’s heart to overflowing.

And then in happy procession they all went down the broken, evil-smelling stairs.

A rough crowd surrounded the unwonted apparition of a cab in that quarter, but the words they spoke were not rough when John Anderson appeared with his wife.

“*Gor* bless him!” cried one hoarse voice; “he give me a meal often when he wanted one hisself.”

“He sot up all one night with me, and made gruel hissen,” said a woman’s feeble voice farther away.

“Never did no yallerin’ and preachin’, but helped everybody,” affirmed a man with a face like a bulldog.

“Glad to see you, mum,” said a virago, who had apparently forgotten to clothe herself when she stepped out to take the air, “if ever a soul deserved a good missus, he do.”

“All right, cabby,” said Fletcher imper-

turbably, but John checked him, and heartily shook the many hands thrust out to seize his.

“ Good-bye, God bless you ! ” he said.

“ Gord bless yer ! ” came the reply in a hoarse, eager shout.

Be sure that the human heart beats every whit as strong and true in the East of London as in the West ; and the benediction and its echoes seemed to follow the three as they drove away, perchance will follow them always, who knows ? to the end of their lives.

THE END.

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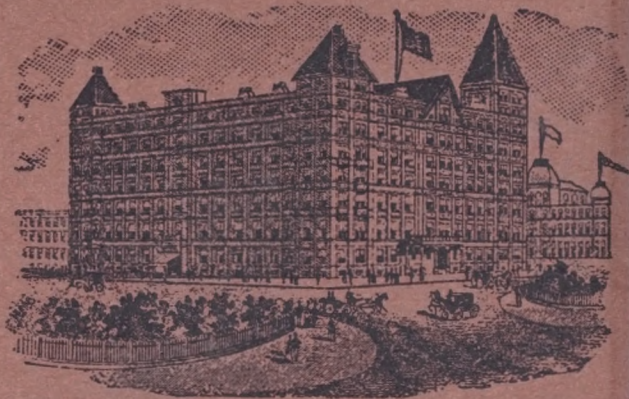
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